University of Alberta

Anne Sexton: A Psychological Portrait

by

Lisa Marie Scalapino ©

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Psychology

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Abstract

In this textual psychobiography, I examine the controversial American poet Anne Sexton. I ask, how does poetry both protect and fail to protect its author from suicide? Working out of the phenomenological aesthetics of Mikel Dufrenne, the language based philosophy of Charles Taylor, and the narrative psychoanalytic theory of Roy Schafer and Donald Spence, I explore Sexton's claim that her "true self" can be found only in her art. In three essays, "Love and the Writer," "Death and the Writer," and "Revision and the Writer," I examine how it is that poetry permits Sexton to become someone else, someone true rather than merely factual. Following Dufrenne, I hold that the art object has its own reality and its own subjectivity. To revise effectively, Sexton must subordinate her own pressing concerns to the other of the poem. To the extent she does so, she moves outside the centripetal pull of her own neurosis and shows herself capable of wonder, sentience and change. This practice not only protects Sexton from suicide but it also bestows on her a sense of grace, a moment of silence and restitution. When at the end of her life she can no longer marshal the strength and patience to revise, her madness usurps the sacred text of her poetry. Her writing once the sacred destination of her hegira, becomes no more than another unendurable place.

Preface

This thesis project began in 1992 when I happened to read Diane Middlebrook's (1991) literary biography of Anne Sexton while studying Charles Taylor's (1989) *Sources of the Self*. Taylor proposes that articulacy--as it is broadly defined--is an essential condition to selfhood. He defines articulacy not only as prose and discourse, but also as silent speech acts such as prayer, reflection and meditation. What drew me to the figure of Anne Sexton was the way in which her poetry appeared to confirm this claim while her death seemed to contest it.

As a confessional poet, as a person who spends her life representing her self in words, should Sexton not be able to make her self in language? As one who can speak both in the music (the silent speech acts) and in the words (the prose or discourse) of poetry to make herself heard--does Sexton not work from a particularly privileged place? How does it happen then that Anne Sexton both succeeds and fails in this endeavor? How is it that poetry first protects and then fails to protect its author from suicide? Intrigued by this problem I drafted my literature review and formulated my proposal.

Initially I cast my project as a psychobiography rooted in the question: how did poetry both protect and fail to protect Anne Sexton from suicide? Finding narrative theory useful in this endeavor, I began by trying to describe how Anne Sexton storied herself in her letters, her poetry and her lived engagements. But I found this tact wanting. Though I could describe Sexton's different stories and even identify contradictory ones, I could not derive the insights I sought. What I actually found most useful in the first five years of the project was the birth of my two children, a son in 1995 and a daughter in 1996. I found motherhood enthralling and humbling. It revealed me to myself in ways I could never have anticipated. My own ambivalence allowed me to understand hers. At the same time, motherhood permitted me to appreciate the enormity of her pain: having misused her dearest and eldest daughter in incestuous relations, how was she to live with herself?

Upon returning to my studies in 1996, I was introduced to the work of French phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne (1973) during our weekly Theoretical Center Seminar. Dufrenne's theory opened Anne Sexton up for me. Dufrenne proposed that a comprehensive biography would be one that sought to know the artist, first, in her work. The aesthetic experience of art, Dufrenne argued, allowed us to grasp the artist as the facts of her life might not. Though in my literature review I aimed to write a psychobiography that had the depth of literature and the insight of analysis, I had no particular method of doing so. Narrative theory proposed that I follow the woman made visible by her acts and her words, but Dufrenne took me farther. Dufrenne's claim that art put us in direct communication with the artist allowed me to write out of my own experience of Anne Sexton as I encountered her in her work. Moreover, studying Sexton through her poetry, allowed me to see the living woman through the phenomenological creator. Dufrenne claimed that when the artist begins to work, she becomes someone else. He calls this other, the phenomenological creator. Contextualized by this creator, I began to see how Anne Sexton the writer and Anne Sexton the suicide might be related.

Working out of three sets of poems, I drew three psychological portraits of Anne Sexton. Looking at how her work configured her in love poems, in death poems and in the process of revision, I proposed that poetry saved Anne Sexton by offering her a glimpse at her own countenance. And yet this countenance, while hers, did not follow immediately from her lived engagements. Rather this countenance showed her as she existed in the moment of creation, as another possible self.

When, late in life, Anne Sexton was no longer able to write, as she said: "more than I knew I knew," she could not continue. Damned by a language that replicated rather than transfigured her living, she could not exist. Writing which once revealed and hid her, writing which once bequeathed on her presence and mystery, now acted only to extend her desecrated living into her art. Such a language could not save.

In the first of the following four papers, I review the literature on psychobiography and narrative theory, and then introduce Dufrenne as my primary theorist. Next working from three different sets of poems, I describe Anne Sexton in love, in death and in revision. Each time I ask the same question: how did her poetry both save and fail to save her. Each time, I refine my response based on how her work reveals her to me. This series of three papers can be viewed then as a set of psychological portraits each drawn in a slightly different light, each making Anne Sexton visible in a slightly different manner. Finally I close with a retrospective that offers my closing thoughts on the three Anne Sextons I have rendered.

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Anne Sexton: A Psychological Portrait

LITERATURE REVIEW

Psychobiography Reconsidered

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Psychobiography Reconsidered

In this paper I will review the psychobiographical tradition, giving special emphasis to how the psychoanalytic biography might be informed by narrative and aesthetic theory. Before beginning this literature review, let me describe my particular interest.

In my thesis I will offer a psychobiographical portrait of the poet Anne Sexton. I am interested in understanding Sexton's claim that "poetry led me by the hand out of madness." I adopt Charles Taylor's (1989) view that articulacy—as it is broadly defined–is an essential condition to selfhood. Taylor defines articulacy not only as prose or discourse, but also as silent speech acts such as prayer, reflection and meditation. I take poetry to be both a form of discourse and a silent speech act in so far as the poet speaks both through words and through the particular kinds of silences that the poetic word evokes. Anne Sexton's very life seems to depend on this possibility. Writing is not an option for her, it is a necessity.

Anne Sexton grew up in an upper-middle class suburb of Boston, married and had two daughters. Her early life had all the hallmarks of an American dream. She summered in Maine, modeled in her youth, and eloped with a handsome young man from an established Boston family. Amidst this stylized bourgeois existence, Sexton's emotional life was anarchic and painful. In her early twenties, amidst the death of her beloved grandaunt, Nana, and the birth of her two daughters, she suffered several severe depressions. To facilitate her therapy, Dr. Martin Orne suggested she write about her experience. Within two years she had become a prolific and a published poet.

My initial view is that writing does have significant therapeutic properties for Sexton. It can pull her from the brink of madness back into sanity; it can convey upon her a sense of identity and purpose. For the sake of it, she is able to discipline herself, challenge her limits, and subjugate her fears.[2] In a word, poetry, and perhaps writing in general, constitutes a higher good that orients, guides and gives meaning to Sexton's life.[3] In so far as psychology attempts to understand the human being and particularly to understand how painful psychological states might be transformed, ameliorated, or made meaningful, Anne Sexton's relationship to language is an important one.

At the same time, her writing appears to have a destructive side. She likens it to drugs and alcohol, suggesting that it, too, is a means of dissociating. She constructs "letter-relationships" whose implied intimacies are seldom borne out by her day-to-day acts. Late in her life, she disavows writing's constitutive power, claiming, "I am not the women of the poems, of the letters, of the kitchen sink." In the course of my psychobiography, I would like to better describe this ambiguity. I would like to investigate how writing appears both to salvage and to sabotage Sexton's psychological development. I situate my work in the tradition of psychobiography and under the guidance of Roy Schafer's (1980) and Donald Spence's (1984) narrative theory as well as Mikel Dufrenne's (1973) aesthetic theory because together these perspectives offer a way of examining an individual's life in its full complexity.

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[2] Sexton reports, "…poetry gave me something to "do" with my life, a little cause, no matter how rotten I was" (Cited in Middlebrook, 1991, p.8).

[3] In Irish Murdoch's words, a higher good is "the object of our love or allegiance…the privileged focus of our attention and will" (Taylor, 1989, p.3).

Psychobiography—What is it?

At its most prosaic psychobiography is an attempt to explain the complexities of an individual's conduct using a given psychological theory or method (Runyan, 1988). The critical feature distinguishing the psychobiography from the biography is that the former makes its theories and methods explicit. Such explicitness is important, the argument goes, "because psychological conceptions are inevitable embedded in life narratives" (Runyan, 1988, p.192). When clearly identified, these presuppositions open themselves to public discussion, permitting more subtle and apt understandings. To define psychobiography in so prescriptive a way, however, is to miss its most valuable attribute—its capacity to convey a feeling for what it was like to be a given person (Cronbac, 1986). At its fullest, psychobiography is a document that while grounded in historical report and psychological theory, has the openness of literature and the depth of analysis. This hybrid quality—while a great asset—has made it difficult to fix psychobiographies exclusively in one discipline. Some view the approach as the academic branch of analytic practice, conceptualizing the psychobiographer as a type of analyst. In part, this association is made because traditionally the psychobiographer's theory of choice has been psychoanalysis. Gilmore (1984) reports that of the psychobiographies that use a personality theory, 90% draw on some version of psychoanalytic thought. Typically such works show how an early traumatic event or a defining childhood relationship explains adult character. The George's (1964) psychobiography of Woodrow Wilson, for instance, tries to understand Wilson's increasingly rigid presidential behavior on the basis of his relation to an over-controlling father. Emily Dickenson's strange, reclusive behavior is made intelligible if seen as a response to childhood sex abuse (Hirschhorn, 1991). Alice James's psychosomatic invalidism can be fathomed when framed in the context of her father's and her brother's alternate seductions and betrayals (Strouse, 1988). Those who saw merit in provocative psychoanalytic studies such as these suggested that this type of analysis need not limit itself to the study of individuals but could be used to understand whole communities, nations and political histories.

Lloyd deMause, the most radical representative of this view, contended that all of psychohistory, including its subset psychobiography, should be inaugurated as its own separate discipline. In deMause's view, this form of scholarship outstripped history, offering illuminating explanations for crucial problems—what psychological mind set leads to war? —rather than mere narrative accounts—what sequence of events precipitated WWII? (Gilmore, 1984). Arguing that psychohistory was problem-centered not period-centered, deMause wanted psychohistorians to break away from surrounding disciplines altogether (Gilmore, 1984). In contrast to deMause, other academics argues that psychoanalytic studies of individuals or groups could be considered a virtual branch of history (Meyerhoff, 1987; Runyan, 1982). Those who argued this position pointed out that historians and psychoanalytically oriented biographers worked in analogous ways. Both sought to understand the present character of a nation or a person by coming to know their respective pasts (Cocks, 1987). Both strove to demystify the person or the era by highlighting disguises, rationalizations and idealizations (Erickson, 1958). Lastly, both hoped that to remember the past would be to master it.

At the opposite end of the critical spectrum, skeptics charged that psychobiography and psychohistory were not part of some incisive new discipline that outshone history, nor were they a compelling psychological kin to the historical enterprise. Rather they were a kind of bastard child that emerged from the ill-conceived coupling of psychology and history. On the psychological front, Eysenk (1954) asserted that the psychoanalytic theory, which so many biographies used, relied on circular reasoning and non-falsifiable tenets. On the historical front, Hempel (1942) and Nagel (1960) concurred, holding that only through empirical inquiry, verification and prediction could history of any kind hope to find general laws and demonstrate clear cause-and-effect relationships (cited in Freeman, 1984). Psychoanalytic biographies, given their circumscribed, subjective, study of individual lives, had little hope of finding such relations. In short, from this point of view, psychobiographies were hardly more than the arbitrary application of the scholar's favorite theory to her preferred subject (Runyan, 1987). In short, they could only be described as non-science, code word, some suggested, for nonsense (Rosaldo, 1989).

This dispute over the nature of psychobiography was possible as long as the approach positioned itself as a form of natural science[4]. To the extent that psychobiographers attempted to provide casual explanations for individual conduct—explaining adult actions and attitudes through childhood trauma, or historical events in terms of a given leader's psychodynamics—they placed themselves under the pull of naturalism with its search for universal laws. The alternate tradition of the human sciences, obviates this search. Theorists from the human sciences, such as Charles Taylor (1989), William Dilthey (1910), Paul Ricouer (1991), Roy Schafer (1992) hold that human beings, unlike objects, play a role in constituting their own identities and destinies. Using language, we depict ourselves in the world and this picture in turn helps us formulate our lives. From within the human science tradition, psychobiography could be defined as an attempt to read and interpret the stories a given person used to describe her lived experience. Such an approach does not look for lawful causes that in all instances produce a certain action. Rather it attempts to illuminate how the individual's own story led to a particular way of acting, in a certain situation, at a particular moment in time. To more fully appreciate why psychobiography might be suited to the human science tradition, let us review its history as a part of the natural sciences.

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[4] This distinction between the natural and human sciences is rooted in Dilthey's 1906-1910 work. He proposed that human thoughts, feelings, values and history could not be studied like the natural world. Human beings could not be treated like objects and subject to experiment and explanation. Instead a person must be "understood". Understanding was produced through the hermeneutic study of human expressions. Thus the human sciences differed from the natural sciences in their aim and their method.

History of Psychobiography as a Natural Science

Psychobiography emerged in early 20th century Vienna, promising to yield radical new insights hitherto unexplored by traditional biography. From the Middle Age hagiographies up until the 19th century studies of exceptional historic figures, biographies had taken the form of idealized testimonials.[5] With the development of psychoanalysis, however, biographers could do more than admire: they could explain. They could perform a psychological post-mortem and show how childhood desires and frustrations informed the strivings of adult life. The first psychoanalytic biographies took two forms. One known as pathography aimed to expose the neurotic drives hidden in the lives and works of famous and influential persons. The most well-known practitioner of this style of biographical study was Lytton Stratchey who tended to use the new genre to denigrate eminent Victorians such as Florence Nightengale and Cardinal Manning by finding selfish compulsions at the root of their good deeds (McAdams, 1988). Freud, himself, was not an advocate of pathography. In fact in 1907, three years before writing his own famous biography of Leonardo, he remarked, "Every poet who shows abnormal tendencies can be the object of pathography, but the pathography cannot show anything new" (Mack, 1971, p.265).

In a conscious effort to distinguish his own study of the life span from pathography, Freud called his work psychobiography. Rather than dissect great works only to diagnose the author's latent neuroses, Freud proposed a dual focus. He suggested that the psychobiographer examine the way a give psychic concern spawned both a neurosis and a creative masterpiece. In short, he broadened the psychologist's emphasis to include not only illness but also achievement. Writing *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood* in 1910, for example, he was particularly interested in how this Renaissance man translated his passionate inborn nature, his periods of sexual abstinence and his over-sexualized relationship to his mother into prodigious scientific and artistic efforts. He believed that art, like the dream, functioned to discharge libido and mitigate symptom formation (Bergmann, 1973). He hoped closed biographical study would allow him to illuminate the dynamics underlying creativity. This ambition, however, proved problematic. Examining Leonardo's "The Virgin and Child and St. Anne" under the light of psychoanalytic theory, Freud came to believe that the painting was a self-created icon designed to unify Leonardo's two mother figures, his wet nurse and his birth mother (Bergmann, 1973). Later scholarship (Elms, 1988) showed, however, that this trio was well known to Florentine painters and that Leonardo had probably borrowed rather than invented it. Even if the painting had some psychological import for da Vinci, Freud's psychodynamic argument that the image arose solely out of an infantile wish seemed difficult to defend. In part, an analytic framework that relied on cause-and-effect reasoning restricted Freud's interpretation of Leonardo's art. In trying to explain the effect—creativity—Freud believed he was obliged to cite a cause—childhood conflict. Working under this assumption,

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[5] An important exception to this trend is James Boswell's 1791 The Life of Samuel Johnson which was one of the first to consider the problem of the biographer's own relationship to his subject (McAdams, 1988).

Freud created a fixed, unidirectional description of Leonardo's artistic process that was destined to distort.

Despite this reductionist tendency, the prospect of psychodynamic explanation held great allure for both writer and reader, and the practice of psychobiography continued to ebb and flow through the 1920's and 1930's. Early attempts such as Morton Prince's 1915 *Psychology of the Kaiser: A Study of His Sentiments & his Obsession* and G. Stanley Hall's 1917 *Jesus, the Christ, in light of Psychology* tended to be isolated, generating no great following (Runyan, 1988; Gilmore, 1984). Later in the 1920's a number of noteworthy studies were written often by those with no formal training in psychology of psychiatry. These works included *Mararet Fuller* (Anthony, 1920), *Samuel Adams* (Harlow, 1923), *Abraham Lincoln* (Clark, 1923) and Albert Schweitzer's psychiatric *Analysis of Jesus Christ* (Runyan, 1988a).

The 1930's saw an upsurge in the production of psychobiographies and a new application of Freud's natural science notion that psychobiography could be used to discover universal laws or mechanisms. Scholars used the approach to study writers such as Tolstoy, Dostoevski, Moliere, Sand, Goethe, Coleridge, Nietzsche, Poe and Rousseau and public figures including Caesar, Lincoln, Napoleon, Darwin and Alexander the Great (Runyan, 1988a). Of particular note, was political scientist, Harold Lasswell whose *Psychopathology and Politics* (1930) initiated a new emphasis on the subgenre of political psychobiography (Runyan, 1988). Laswell proposed that political leaders could be understood in terms of a simple formula $p)\ d)\ r = P$ meaning that private motives (p) are displaced onto public objects (d) and rationalized in terms of public interest (r); this equals the political man (P) (Lowenberg, 1983). With this simple equation, Laswell suggested that political history, like art, could be understood as an expression of the individual psyche. In brief, as Laswell expanded psychobiographies territory, he simultaneously reinforced its mechanistic aspect. He argued that just like the physical elements studied by physicists and chemists, the political leader could be represented with a formula.

During the same decade, Henry Murray director of the Harvard Psychological Clinic called for psychologists to undertake an intensive study of individual subjects, which he termed personology (Polkinghorne, 1988). Like Laswell, Murray formulated his scholarly ambitions in naturalist terms, but unlike Laswell he rebelled against the constraints such ambitions imposed. Instead of searching for a single formula to explain the "political man," Murray hoped to delineate a set of variables that, in combination, could explain all personality types. Though using a chemist's metaphor to conceptualize his task, Murray simultaneously pushed against the limits such a conception implied. Rather than isolate behaviors and stimuli in a laboratory setting, for example, he pioneered studies of normal individuals in ordinary settings.

He was particularly interested in studying life narratives. He believed that personality could best be conceived as a congress of competing personages—each with its own narrative type. Human conduct was the end product of interactions that took place among an individual's different personages. These interactions would have certain recurring themes, and these themes constituted what we knew as personality.

Murray derived the most famous of his narrative types when working on a case study of one Harvard undergraduate he called Grope. Mapping this young man's life history onto the ancient story of Icarus—the boy who soared too near the sun and fell to earth when the heat melted his wings--Murray proposed that Grope's particular psychological state could best be characterized by what he called the "Icarus Complex". This complex, Murray contended, was one of many possible controlling narratives which shape a certain set of personality trends into a given constellation. To identify other such narratives Murray believed psychologists had to collect autobiographies from their subjects and begin to tease out the stories told by each of that person's competing personages. Though working in the naturalist tradition with naturalist goals, Murray pushed the boundaries of this tradition by reconceptualized personality as the confluence of widely defined variables. In contrast to Laswell's cryptic symbols, Murray's variables were whole complexes of life narratives. In placing the biographical study at the center of his psychology, Murray began to problematize naturalist desire for simplicity (Polkinghorne, 1988; McAdams, 1988a).

Across the Atlantic, in Vienna, Charlotte Buhler (1933) shared related interests and ambitions (cited in McAdams, 1988). Like Murray, she believed that reliable psychological knowledge could only be derived from an exhaustive study of the entire life span. Together with Else Frenkel (1936), she collected life histories of almost 400 European men and women from the 18th to the 20th century and showed through content analysis that the data "revealed rather sharply demarcated phases through which every person passed in the course of his life" (cited in McAdams, 1988). From her extensive comparison, *The Human Course of Life,* she concluded that human development moved through five discreet stages, expanding, stabilizing and restricting its growth over the life course (Gilmore, 1984). Like Murray, Buhler recognized that human beings must be studied in all their complexity. At the same time she founded her work on the natural science assumption that the psychological life cycle, like the bodily one, took a prescribed course that could be charted. In other words, Buhler's model was still an organic one. She assumed growth passed through fixed stages; that it was unidirectional, irreversible and hierarchical. Moreover, she still assumed that the researcher could stand apart and study her subjects progress objectively. (Freeman, 1984).

By the 1940's the production of psychobiographies had waned, but the attempt to fit the approach into a natural science schema continued. In 1942 Gordon Allport wrote his heavily cited book *The Use of Personal Documents in Psychological Science*. As had Murray and Buhler before him, Allport worked both within and against the natural science tradition. He took for granted the idea that the goals of natural science were appropriate to the study of human beings, yet he protested the paradigm" supposition that personal documents were too subjective to be of use. In his book, he traced the ways in which--letters, diaries, autobiographies, literary work—could serve and had served as reliable sources of psychological knowledge. Citing psychological classics such as Helmholtz *Physiologische Optikk*, Ebbinghaus' study of memory, William James' study of religious experience, Stanley G. Hall's study of adolesence[6], he argued that personal documents allowed the psychologist to study human beings in all their "natural complexity" (Allport, 1942). Furthermore, Allport claimed that idiographic case studies such as psychobiographies met the demands of "nomothetic" science. He asserted that using personal documents as concrete evidence, the researcher came to understand "the nature of a single person's live" well enough to predict and control it (Allport, 1942). In sum, idiographic study could find laws that governed behavior—only these laws were personal rather than universal. By reducing the scope of the law, but not its lawfulness, Allport struggled to fit natural science model of psychological knowledge to its subject matter.

The 1950's marked a turning point for psychobiography with the publication of Erik Erikson's psychobiography, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (1958). Erikson took issue with the belief that psychodynamics, alone, could account for a person's development. In particular, he denounced psychoanalytic biography's practice of "orinology" which he defined as that "... habit of thinking which reduces every human situation to an analogy with an earlier one" (Erikson, 1958). Instead, he insisted the psychobiographer recognize how important character-forming developments of adult life were invariably shaded by culture and history (Erikson, 1958). In his study of Martin Luther, Erikson showed how Luther's individual reckoning with the Catholic church, voiced a crisis of faith that was emerging throughout 16th century Northern Europe. He highlighted the interaction between the man and the times, showing how one man's prolonged identity crisis reformed the religious consciousness of an entire population (Loewenberg, 1983). This work on Luther led Erikson to posit that even the more ordinary individual needed to be understood in the "framework of social influences and traditional institutions which determined his perspective" (Erikson, 1958).

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[6] In more recent years Jean Piaget's careful study of his own children might constitute another example of a case in which "personal records" led to important theoretical insight.

To study this reciprocal process, Erikson suggested that the psychobiographer needed to take up the practice of "triple bookkeeping". He had to understand his subject on three levels simultaneously:

> a) the level of the body and all the constitutional givens with which the individual was endowed; (b) the level of the ego, which refers to the subject's idiosyncratic way of synthesizing his or her experience in order to make meaning of the world and to cope with anxiety and conflict; and (c) the level of family and society, which refers both to the individual's developmental history within his or her family and the particular societal, cultural, and historical ethos which shapes and, in the cases of extraordinary individuals,

is shaped by the subject of the study (Erikson, 1958).

In sum, Erikson broadened psychobiography's emphasis by asserting that one's identity could not be fathomed apart from one's historical period.

Ironically the same year Erikson argued that psychodynamics, alone, could not offer an adequate understanding of human conduct. William Langer (1958) contended that such dynamics were essential to understanding history. In his address to the American Historical Association called "The Next Assignment," Langer insisted that if they were to explain the influence of malevolent, inscrutable leaders such as Stalin, Hitler and Idi Amin, historians had to use the insights of depth psychology (Runyan, 1988). In fact, in his own studies of the Black Plague, Langer had shown how omnipotent, vengeful leaders could manipulate entire populations whom, duress had made vulnerable and malleable. He believed that a similar approach was essential to understanding phenomenon such as the holocaust.

Langer's provocative thesis, along with Erikson's revolutionary psychobiography are sometimes viewed as delimiting the province of psychobiography and inaugurating the era of psychohistory. Notice, however, that in their convergence, the two movements were actually working at cross-purposes. Where psychobiographer's such as Erikson were trying to limit the degree to which analytic mechanisms were used to account for adult maturation, psychohistorians, such as Langer were trying to extend that practice. Psychohistorians hoped to show that the conduct of entire nations and their leaders could be made sensible through psychoanalysis. By the end of the 1950's, the study of individual lives had not only exceeded but radically revised what Freud originally envisioned. Psychobiographies not only were written to better understand an artist's creativity, but also as a way to develop personality theories, to understand political and religious leaders and to make sense of social movements at large. At the same time, on another level, the practice of psychoanalytic biography was facing serious challenges. Variables were becoming amorphous and hard to isolate as Murray insisted human conduct be studied in natural settings. Outcomes were no longer singly predicted by psychoanalytic mechanics but now, according to Erikson, were co-determined by the course of history.

Contemporary Psychobiography

Not surprisingly Erikson and Langer's work provoked a plethora of modern psychobiographical accounts[7] and an ever-widening range of methodologies. Runyan (1988) reports that more than half of all psychobiographical publications from the 1920's through the 1980's occurred after 1960. At its best, this proliferation of work from different fields engendered a cross-fertilization that strengthened and diversified the approach. Wolfenstein's (1981) study of Malcolm X, for example, drew on Marxist as well as Freudian interpretive principles (Runyan, 1988). MacAlpine and Hunter's (1966) psychobiography of King George III combined modern medical and psychological knowledge to argue that the King's symptoms were caused by a hereditary metabolic disorder, porphyry, rather than manic-depressive psychosis (Runyan, 1988a). Amidst this expanded interdisciplinary production, methodology was more intensively debated. Gilmore (1984) notes that since 1960, 87% or articles on psychobiography focus on method. Marking the two extremes of this discussion are those who remained in the naturalist camp and attempted to capture complex data with ever more sophisticated quantitative techniques. At the opposite pole, were those who departed the naturalist paradigm altogether in favor of the narrative approach and the human science tradition.

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[7] To note just a few, historians such as Mazlish examined Richard Nixon (1972), Waite: Adolf Hitler (1977); political scientists such as Glad have studied Jimmy Carter (1980); academic personality psychologists examined Allport (1972), McAdams: Yuko Misima (1985); Literary critics like Edel have produced a prize-winning examination of Henry James (1985) and model studies like Bate's (1977) Samuel Johnson.

Contemporary quantitative analyses are particularly interesting because while they were designed to meet standards of natural science, they also prove useful to those with narrative interests. In general, such analyses begin by making assumptions that fix and limit the fluid, multifaceted qualities of their data. Winter and Carlson (1988) psychobiographical study of Richard Nixon's motives offers one example. First these scholars posit that motives are "relatively stable, recurrent preferences for certain goal states" (Winter & Carlson, 1988). Having defined motives as a constant, Winter et al.. use what they term the "running text" method, to code and count the motive imagery in Nixon's Presidential inaugural address. This method allows them to systematically affirm or reject hypotheses on the basis of quantified results. Proponents of such an approach claim that it brings a greater degree of precision to the psychobiographical practice.

One of the more provocative cases of this kind is Stewart, Franz and Layton's (1988) study of English pacifist, Vera Brittain. Using a theoretically derived content analysis, Stewart, et al. showed how Erikson's stages of growth could serve as an effective frame for disembedding the major themes and plots in Brittain's life narrative (Stewart, et al.., 1988). This "proof" in itself simply follows the dictates of natural science which requires that a scientist use measurable evidence to verify or contest a given theoretical model. The actual quantitative evidence, however, might also be viewed from a narrative perspective. In Stewart, et al.'s study, for example, the content analysis comparing Brittain's correspondence during WWI too her later account of the same period shows how Brittain remembers her conversion to nursing as coming four months later than it actually did. This quantitatively derived insight might be valuable, not so much as a conclusion, but rather as a point of departure, a finding that invites further interpretation. In sum, new quantitative developments can be seen in two ways. First, they can be viewed as an extension of the natural science psychobiographical tradition which requires that the study of life narratives meet the standards of an empirical science. Alternatively, they can be seen as useful devices with which to trace the patterns in life narratives and thus make possible the next level of analysis which asks—what do these patterns mean?

This latter possibility leads us to the other end of psychobiography's methodological continuum: the narrative approach. Rather than attempting to salvage psychobiography by adapting more sophisticated and precise quantitative methods, the narrative approach changes paradigms altogether. Situated in the human science paradigm, this approach aims to understand a person's life stories rather than explain them.

Dilthey and the Human Sciences

To better grasp this distinction, we might review the writing of Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911). Dilthey was a philosopher of history whose life work revolved around the questions: how can we come to understand another human being? He argues that we come to know others in much the same way we come to know ourselves—by interpreting objectified human expressions. Until we give experience a public form, an objectified, communicable name, we ourselves, cannot fully know or recognize what it is that we have lived.

In contrast to the natural sciences that seek to explain, to pinpoint a cause and isolate its related effect, the human sciences seek to understand objectified expressions. This work takes a hermeneutic form. The human science scholar continually recontextualizes a given expression so she can better explicate its range of meanings. Her goal is to formulate more subtle and encompassing interpretations. At the same time she strives to hold her account open to acknowledge that in human beings which defies understanding. In short, where natural science strives to produce explanations that irrefutably capture the essence of a phenomenon, human science attempts to renders an understanding of the other that is at once coherent and unfinished, profound and problematic.

To further describe understanding, Dilthey (1910) divided it into two forms. The first form, elementary understanding, allows us to recognize ordinary, unambiguous expressions. One could assert, for example, that an isosceles triangle had three sides, two of which were the same length, and this proposition could be understood in precisely those terms. The distinguishing mark of these logical constructions is that they could be conveyed without modification from speaker to listener. Similarly, intentional and unintentional actions could be directly understood if the observer had sufficient context. If I shoveled snow from my driveway and then departed in my car, an observer could surmise that I cleared a path so I could drive away. If I popped a button off my coat as I went to button it, the observer could conclude that pop was accidental. In short, certain human expressions could be immediately understood because of their inherent logic or because they were, "saturated" with cultural meaning. In a word, they were conventional. Though essential to practical life, these elementary understandings did not tell us much about a person's psychological life.

To understand another human being, we need to turn to "higher understanding". By definition, higher understanding is always an indirect process. It is brought to bear when we feel unsure about how to interpret a given expression. Was her silence at dinner a mark of shyness, disinterest or anger? To understand the woman at the dinner table, Dilthey contends that, first, we need to contextualize her. We need to attend to what we know of her situation, her relationships, her history, and her immediate surroundings. Second, we must rely on our own parallel-lived experience. To make sense of her discomfort, we must arrange ourselves in her circumstances. We must transpose our understanding of ourselves onto her. This transposition is not a mere intellectual act for Dilthey; rather, it requires that I feel the reverberations of another's experience within me as I imaginatively reconstitute it. In doing so, I allow my own grasp of silence to be altered. I enter the paradigm of another person's experience and revise my own meanings accordingly. This qualitative shift is the most crucial feature of what Dilthey terms "higher understanding". My own sense of what silence might mean is amplified, deepened, and perhaps transformed. New possibilities emerge. My relationship to my own lived experience is irrevocably changed. In such an act, I bridge what Dilthey calls the "inner distance" between my subject and myself. Moreover, in developing this higher understanding I open the "narrow subjectivity" of my life experience to the whole. I make out of it a more general understanding that constitutes knowledge of life.

Writing "The Phenomenology of the Aesthetic Experience," Mikel Dufrenne (1973) makes similar claims about the way in which we come to know the aesthetic object and its creator. Like Dilthey, Dufrenne proposes that we understand the 'other' of art by submitting ourselves to it, feeling as it feels, and allowing ourselves to be changed by it. Where Dilthey emphasizes mediate experience, however, Dufrenne emphasizes immediate experience. Dufrenne claims that we, first, feel the reverberations of the aesthetic object "allow the work to be at one with our body" *before* imagination and representation attempt to objectify our knowing as discrete characters, events or sequences (Casey,1973, p.xxviii).

For Dufrenne imagination and representation play a secondary, if essential role. For Dilthey such imagining is primary as it is through this imagining that we open ourselves to the other's affective state. Despite these different emphases, both philosophers conclude their descriptions of 'understanding another person' (Dilthey) and 'perceiving the work of art' (Dufrenne) by suggesting that one must permit oneself to be changed by the encounter. For Dufrenne, " I have derealized myself in order to proclaim the painting's reality and I have gained a foothold in the new world which it opens to me, a new man myself" (Dufrenne, 1973, p.57). I will return to Dufrenne later to describe my particular project, but for the moment I will return to the critical review of narrative theory that leads me to select Dufrenne as my primary theorist.

Emerging out of Dilthey's seminal thought, narrative theorists assume that we come to know one another by "reading" each other's expressions as narratives. From the narrative point of view, all expressions—daily conversation, mannerisms, letters, reported dreams—can be viewed as interpretable texts. Working from these objective forms, we can ask: what stories did this poet tell about who she was, what she cared about, and how she lived her life? How did these stories, in turn, shape her conduct? Where do her stories clash or fragment? What is the longer life narrative implied by a succession of smaller narratives?

Not surprisingly, since narrative theory first began to interest psychologists in the 1970's, it has had particular relevance for psychoanalysts whose "talking cure" has always viewed the analysand's own story as a critical source. Given the preponderance of psychoanalytic biographies, we might also expect that the theory has potential to influence the practice of psychobiography. In the next section, I would like to consider how narrative theory has revised psychoanalysis and by extension how it might alter psychobiography.

Narrative Theory & Psychoanalytic Biography

One of the first people to apply narrative theory to psychoanalysis was Sherwood (1969), who suggested that part of the analyst's task was to help the client create a coherent, continuous and comprehensive personal history. Sherwood argued, such a history would in itself have a therapeutic effect because like a tailor made suit, it simply fit better and so was more comfortable.

In 1971, Habermas argued that more than surface coherence was needed. The analyst's task in Habermas' eyes was to use narrative to crack the client's "code of private significance" (Habermas, 1978). In this view, the analysand had lost certain parts of herself because they could not be discussed. In Hannah Arendt's terms, they had been "…deprived of all things essential for human life …of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others" (Cited in Polkinghorne, 1988). Under this conception the analyst had to restore what Habermas call "frozen symbols" by first returning them to their original context. Such a restoration gave them a form which would allow them to be shared and eventually permit them to be placed back into the hermeneutics of perpetual reinterpretation.

In short, Habermas redefined psychoanalysis as depth hermeneutics, which involved unearthing damaged symbols, returning them to their fluid, negotiable meanings in public discourse, and thereby liberating whole realms of the client's psyche (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Up until this juncture, the use of narrative understanding had served to highlight certain features of the psychoanalytic process as it stood. Sherwood (1969) had stressed the importance of having a more complete, more adequate and more comfortable story; Habermas had emphasized the liberating quality of a story that brought buried static symbols to public light and so restored the psyche. Still, these glosses had accentuated certain features of psychoanalytic practice rather than revising its basic tenets.

It was not until Roy Schafer (1980) and Donald Spence (1984) began to discuss narrative theory that the psychoanalytic process itself was reconceptualized. In 1984 Spence challenged the long-standing assumption that therapy could bring about change by enabling a client to recover an event in all its factual, chronological and emotional particulars. Instead, he suggested that therapy facilitated change by allowing the client to begin the creative process of reconstructing that event. The important truth, for Spence, was this constructed one, that he called the "narrative truth". In contrast to historic truth, this narrative truth could come in the form of screen memories or even fictions so long as it "managed to capture within its code the patient's real trouble: (Spence, 1984, p.65). Extending Spence's initial idea that therapy might not always need to unearth the "real" truths, Roy Schafer proposed that the entire point of analysis might simply be to revise the analysand's story so that the meanings, origins and significances of her present difficulties could be appreciated and, as needed, modified. In Schafer's view, the role of the therapist was that of editor or "provisional amanuensis" (Schafer, 1980, p.31).

In configuring the task of the psychoanalyst as a reconstructive one rather than an archaeological one, narrative theory also had implications for the psychoanalytic biographer. At first glance, the suggestion that clients could be construed as texts brought the analyst all that much closer to the biographer who had always known her subject through her writings. Consider, for example, how readily Paul Ricoeur's description of self-knowledge suits the psychobiographer. In the tradition of Dilthey. Ricoeur holds that self-knowledge is not immediate, it is not know to us in some preverbal, utterly private, felt form. Arguing against Husserlian idealism, Ricouer contends self knowledge depends on an act of interpretation. It is derived "indirectly from cultural signs of all sorts" (Ricoeur, 1991, p.80). If, as psychobiographer, we accept this assumption, we can view personal documents, memorabilia and third party accounts as part of the raw material from which the individual, herself, fashions an identity. Notice that once the emphasis has shifted from unearthing an essential self to construing a possible self, then the subject's, the analyst's, and the psychobiographer's efforts converge. Each is engaged in the task of arranging a series of events in an effort to make meaning. They differ primarily in their perspective. The subject immersed in the flow of her daily-lived experience might have a myopic view. The analyst one step removed working with free associations, dreams, and a client's nuanced presence might have another. The biographer working retrospectively with a completed story, might have yet a third. No one is assured an advantage by virtue of his/her position. Any one of the three might offer the most profound and illuminating insight into the subject's life.

No more ought we side with Ricouer who contends that the subject speaks from a "confused and limited perspective" of the eye-witness than we ought to deride the psychobiographer as speaking from her own subjectivity as the outsider (adapted from Rosaldo, 1989, p.135). Rather we can conceive of the psychobiographer's work as a part of the continuum of human story telling in which narratives of one ilk are perpetually aggregating and then giving way to rival narratives of another ilk. The task for all narrators is generally the same, in so far as it is an interpretive one. What changes is the distance between the interpreter and the life that is being understood.

Beyond placing psychobiographies within an ongoing interpretive practice, narrative theory is useful to psychoanalytic biography because it proposes that psychological states may take specific narrative forms. Ernest Keen (1986), for example, suggests that the paranoid lives by a narrative which has no future. By this, he means that narratives are not open, indeterminate structures as Ricouer describes them. Rather, the paranoid's life narrative is prematurely closed. In the paranoid's experience the "new" is not permitted (Keen, 1986). The story that is created at the end of the day is never original. In Keen's works, "Nothing violates the paranoid's expectations . . . everything confirms the already established plot" (Keen, 1986, p.178). There is no "I" whose discretion can reconfigure the story line and so eventually the paranoid becomes tightly circumscribed in one infinitely repeating persecution scenario.

In an analogous vein, Crites (1986) writes about the way mixing up narrative strategies for the past and the future can create unhappiness. He suggests that if we use a tight-knit, detailed narrative to describe the future, our experience, like the paranoid's, will be prematurely limited. At the same time, if we use a narrative that is too loose or unformed to tell the stories of our past, our identity will become diffuse, contourless. A sense of well being comes, according to Crites, from using the right kind of narrative for different forms of time—a structured, well connected narrative for the past and an open, multifaceted one for the future.

Like unhappiness, Wyatt (1986) suggests that self-deception also has a narrative equivalent which entails a kind of mismatch. Just as an individual might suffer psychological distress because she inscribes the wrong sense of time over a given segment of her life, so too she may suffer when she imposes one life narrative uncomfortably over its rival. Such an ill-fitting story can become a form of self-deception. Caught in the dominant story, the individual suffers because she emplots her life in accord with a pattern that is, for her, unlivable. Typically such a story is borrowed from the prevailing social schema and is designed to foster a certain self-image (Wyatt, 1986). Th psychobiographer (or the analyst) who attends to this self-preserving initial tale detects its ill fit as gaps, omissions, and contradictions. These tell-tall signs suggest the possibility of another only partially revealed rival narrative.

To better appreciate how a narrative of self-deception surfaces, consider the contradiction in Plath's stories about her poet-husband Ted Hughs. On the one hand her "fondest fiction" is that he "is my best critic; I am his" (Van Dyne, 1992, p. 19). At the same time, this ideal is at odds with the 1950 martial narrative in which the good husband is successful and good wife devoted ("He [Hughs] is a genius. I his wife"). When Plath strains to make the two compatible, she cuts out a crucial part of her own experience—her own poetic ambition.

Unacknowledged, unstoried, Plath's poetic striving is denied in name, but asserted as overt wifely nagging and covert plans to write in secret:

> I must not nag (anything Ted doesn't like: this is nagging); he, or course, can nag me about light meals; straight necks, writing exercises, from his superior seat. The famed and fatal jealousy of professionals—luckily he is ahead of me so far I never need fear the old superiority heel-grinding—in weak-neck impulse... Must work, and get out of paralysis—write and show him nothing. ...Smile, write in secret, showing no one. Amass a great deal. (Van Dyne, 1992, p.21).

The erratic quality of this last passage signals a gap in Plath's master, self-preserving tale. Her preferred story of marital devotion and complementarity

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coherent, self-contained story given by the dominant culture obfuscates. Making a yet more radical claim than Feliski, Kristeva (1986) argues that autobiographical texts tell the truth only when they reveal "gaps in identity." These gaps do not open onto hidden but more real selves, rather they exist simply as empty spaces that reflect the truth of having no self. For Kristeva there is no real woman outside the text to whom the text must remain faithful. All that a woman is lies in her text. If any kinds of truths are to be known, they are to be glimpsed only by the practice in which the writer confronts herself reflexively in her text. Truth then--to the extent that it can be said to exist at all-- is a process not a final meaning. Simply seeing one's own erratic text as it stands would constitute a kind of truthfulness, a kind of authenticity. The marred contradictory narrative that Wyatt (1986) would take as a sign of self-deception, Kristeva might see as a step toward truth. For Kristeva this marred narrative might constitute the first crucial step in a reflexive practice that continuously rediscovers the illusory nature of the true self. In review, then, we can see that a given narrative form may have more than one psychological analog. Self-deception might appear as a scattered, contradictory narrative or as a coherent, totalizing one. Truth might be expressed as a gap in a given narrative or as seamless, cohesive tale. The practice of finding textual analogs for psychological states is of course an interpretive one. Though the narrative form a given psychological state takes may be disputed, all critics concur that this form reveals something about the speaker's psychological process. Examining and interpreting this form then would be a critical part of a pscyhobiographer's task.

To review, the work of a narrative-based psychobiography is to identify the stories an individual uses to make sense of her life, to ask: who does she say that she is? Having established the themes that inform her first-hand accounts, the next step is to examine the form of a given narrative. What does the form itself tell us? Where does the chosen form break apart? What might this failing express? What constraining cultural narratives might be at play? These are the circle of questions within which a narrative-based psychobiography might begin.

When coupled with this alternative narrative perspective, we may find that psychobiographies typical strengths and weaknesses are due for revision. In the next section we will consider the criticisms of psychobiography that have accrued in its more than 90-year life time and see how they stand in light of this new theoretical possibility.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Psychobiographical Approach

Critics contend that psychobiographies have produced disappointing results because they rely on inadequate evidence, take a reductionist stance, lack transhistoric generality, and are skewed by the subjectivity of the practitioner. I will briefly discuss these issues, giving special attention to the narrative theorist's perspective.

Reductionist Stance

Of all the psychobiographical studies at risk of producing reductive interpretations, psychoanalytic ones best illustrate the problem.[8] A biographer might easily construe limited, second-hand accounts of childhood histories in a way that suits the theory but wreaks havoc with the historic reality. This tendency has provoked the charge that psychobiographer's take a "cavalier attitude toward fact" in their rush to fit the vicissitudes of a subject's life course to an oversimplified Freudian model (Stannard, 1980, p.52).

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[8] In Abraham's (1911) study of painter Segantini, for example, the father's desertion and the

To address these grievances, the method's advocates initially proposed ego psychology, arguing that it offered more complex ways to understand adult conduct. Winnicott (1958), for example, suggests that childhood has some effect on adult development but that this effect is mitigated by the adult's own capacity to cope with neurosis. Erikson (1958) goes further and argues that character and identity are shaped in the later stages of adult life not childhood. In fact, for Erikson identity formation is a psychological challenge that the child is not yet prepared to address. In view of these alternative theories of psychological development, psychobiography's advocates argue that the approach ought not be dismissed because it cannot adequately cover each period of the life span. Instead, the careful psychobiographer ought to use a theory of adult development rather than relate all adult conduct to infantile antecedents (Runyan, 1988).

Reasonable though this suggestion is, it does not completely respond to the more fundamental charge that any psychological theory—when imposed on a given life—will reduce the life experience to the explanatory confines of the theory. Commenting on this problem Alexander George (1987) suggests that theory be

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mother's death when he was only 5 yrs. old were seen as the basic trauma that motivated his art (Bergmann, 1973).

sued to elicit insights, rather than to form a final interpretation. In his own study of Woodrow Wilson, George points out that he relied on Karen Horney's (1950) descriptions of neurotic drives to illuminate the dynamics of Wilson's compulsive character. At the same time, what most interested George was not Wilson's neurosis. It was how he kept his self-defeating behaviors in check and even managed to "harness them for socially productive purposes" (George, 1987, p.139). George suggests, then that being familiar with different psychological hypotheses can deepen and broaden a psychological study, but he goes on to stress that such theses must not be used as ready-made explanations. The psychobiographer must pay equal attention to the ways in which her subject's life diverges from the theory at hand. For it is only there that the psychobiographer traces out how individuals, whatever their psychological limits, neuroses, or conditions, take the events of life into their own hands and build a personality. To trace this "making" of the personality, psychologists can make use of narrative theory and hermeneutics.

As discussed earlier, the narrative approach differs from other psychological theories because it assumes the subject under examination is a free agent. This position permits each analysis to have an open-ended quality. Using such a theory the psychobiographer need not posit that "motives" remain constant. Instead, she can examine how, the "real" motive changes with each retelling of the story. Mutable and indeterminate as such a story may be, it too, however, has reductionist premises which the psychobiographer must consider.

One of the most important hazards the narrative-based psychobiographer faces is the tendency to overlook stray information that does not appear to be part of any story. In an attempt to knit a comprehensive, aesthetically pleasing story about her subject, a biographer may smooth out the uncanny, the enigmatic, the comic, and the inexplicable (Loewenstein, 1991). Barbara Herrnstein-Smith charges, for example, that stories present experience as "an unproblematic, and therefore unrepresentative, continuum" (Cited in Mitchel, 1980, p.3). Robert Scholes goes further calling narrative the next "opiate" and suggesting that in telling stories we foster a comforting but nonetheless false sense of coherence by concealing secrets (Cited in Mitchel, 1980). In short, even a narrative-based psychobiography cannot attempt to completely capture the shimmering, polysemous quality of immediate experience.

For the psychobiographer, this critique means that we must guard against the temptation to form one perfect or "totalizing" narrative. In Freud's view we need to listen with evenly hovering attention. In Spence's we need to listen for the "unexplained residue". Both men suggest that after discovering how a narrative coheres, we must also remain open to the unexpected and the incongruous.

Though narrative theory offers no particular technique for engendering this awareness in a psychobiographer, it does create conducive conditions. Rather than prescribing fixed developmental stages or definitive intrapsychic dynamics, the theory recommends a processual analysis. In proposing a process, not a conclusion, narrative-based psychobiography allows for, in Allport's words, "…the very real possibility that no two lives are alike in their motivational processes" (Allport, 1942, p.57).

Inadequate Evidence

A second, often-cited flaw in the psychobiographical approach is that it must rely on evidence that is insufficient, of the wrong kind or not from the right period (i.e. childhood) of the subject's life. In Barzun's (1974) frequently quoted indictment,

> Everything a psychohistorian (and by implication the psychobiographer) uses is necessarily scant, his tools, his method, his data is indirect the patient is absent, and the clues he may have left to his once living psyche are the product of change. Diaries, letters, literary work form a random record, in which expressions of mood are more frequent than evidence of actions. (Cited in Runyan, p.203)

Elaborating on this last point, Allport (1942) points out that sources such as letters and diaries are problematic because they form a random record that is more likely to express the subject's mood—particularly bitter, angry or sad moods—than to tell us about his or her actions. Furthermore, he notes that only certain kinds of people keep diaries or write voluminous correspondence. If the psychobiographer's goal is to discover laws common to all humanity, these records may prove woefully inadequate.

In defense, Runyan responds that different research methods are appropriate for revealing different kinds of psychological knowledge (Runyan, 1988). The psychobiographer's contribution might be to better understand what is "disorderly, heterogeneous and filled with structures, processes and meanings that change over time in unpredictable ways" (Cocks, 1987, p.ix). To that end, what letters and diaries and literary works lose in representativeness, they might gain in intensity.

If we accept that experience need not be common to be of value, we are led quickly to the next problem. Given the idiosyncratic nature of psychobiographer's evidence how will be know if personal documents are in error or even out-and-out deceptive? Even in the most frank of autobiographies, errors memory may lead to distortion. Compounding this problem are the ego's inherent protective tendencies that may also unwittingly alter the record (Allport, 1942, p.109). Caught up in the mood of the moment, the narrator may unreliably report her own life. The prudent psychobiographer would need to take this possibility into account and use more than one source to document an individual's interpersonal relations. Also, as Mack (1979) suggests legitimate analytic interpretations must recognize the purposes for which the document was created and the "directions and limits" its context imposes (p.548).

A third problem involving the psychobiographer's evidence is that it attempts to detect unarticulated motives or feelings, and yet lacks the multifaceted face-to-face richness of the therapeutic interaction. This question becomes yet more pointed if we accept Lindseth's (1986) suggestion that the most telling personal material is not the hard and fast facts documenting individual conduct, but rather the subtle nuances inscribed in a person's every move. He suggests the psychotherapist needs to find out not whether a man tips his hat to a woman, but rather does this man "lift his hat jerkily, or with grace, or without thinking?" How is the psychobiographer to gather such data? Allport argues that psychobiographies can manage some of these difficulties by delimiting their sources and using details founding memorabilia such as "scrap books, collections, clothes, books, doodles" (Runyan, 1982, p.204). Narrative theorists (Schafer, 1992; Bruner, 1990; Gergen & Gergen, 1986) stress that even when working with the printed text, the form of the writing can be revealing.[9] In other works, the form that a person uses to relay a life history is "not merely decorative but has true poetic value" (Hexter, 1971, p.45). These orientations may prove informative, but certainly not equivalent to a personal encounter. Perhaps the best response to the charge of inadequate that evidence is Cronbach's (1986) suggestion that having multiple conceptions and methods serves the social sciences well. From this perspective, we need not ask the psychobiographer to offer "the whole and only truth" which will displace all others, but only that she make clear and tenable some new perspective (Cronbach, 1986, p.97).

Transhistoric Generality

Another common criticism of the psychobiographer is that she draws on 20th century personality theories whose assumptions do not fit and cannot be used to understand personality in other periods. In short, the approach is parochial or in Stannard's view "ahistorical" (Stannart, 1980, p.151). Again, psychoanalytic biographers are prime offenders. Both Freud and Erikson locate pivotal developmental crisis in childhood or adolescence. Critics point out that childhood was not considered a distinct life state until the 17th century and adolescence not until the 20th century (Gilmore, 1984).[10]

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[9] Toril Moi (1994) illustrates this point, showing how when Beauvoir is depressed, she draws more heavily on personal rather than academic writings to compose her memoir.

The challenge facing the psychobiographer is: can she make a valid interpretation of a historic figure using a conception of self or of identity that did nor exist for them? Psychobiography's supporters counter that some aspects of human nature are universal and transhistorical and that those do lend themselves to interpretation via modern personality theory. At the same time, supporters acknowledge that to give a fair reading of a given historic figure, the psychobiographer must be conversant with the religious, moral, and social context. From a hermeneutic viewpoint, the job of any interpreter is to preserve the original meaning by translating it into the terms of the day. This perspective reframes the problem of transhistoric validity asking not should we apply present-day theories to other periods, but rather since we cannot avoid the latter, how can we do so responsibly?

Skewed by the subjectivity of the practitioner

One final criticism of psychobiography is that it is not an objective scientific method. Not all psychologists accept this premise. Those following a narrative tradition contend that the human being could not be studied in the same way as an object. In Taylor's works, "To have a 'self' was not the same as to have a heart or a liver" (Taylor, 1989, p.106). From this alternate paradigm the psychobiographer's subjectivity is essential to reaching an understanding. Instead of conceptualizing the research task as one of prediction and control, the psychobiographer must think in terms of receptivity and dialog. As Lindseth suggested, 'when I wish to understand another person, I have to assume that he has something to say to me that I do not already know, something to give me that I do not already have" (Lindseth, 1986, p.71). As in any dialog, the knowledge gained is made up both of what the subject has imparted and of what the listener has construed. Psychological knowledge, from this angle, is "not inherently there, manifest, but is a product of lived, empathetic immersion (Freeman, 1984, p.4.)

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[10] Phillippe Aries (Paris, 1960) classic study of the history of childhood proposed that childhood was a category of life developed among aristocracy and bourgoise of Western Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries (Cited in Gilmore 1984, p.24).

Though mutually constructed, psychobiography ought not to be seen as irrational or arbitrary. Each rendering is read by other members of a given community which bring their critical judgement to bear, deeming some interpretations better than others. In fact, the first of these critical readers is often the author herself who through reflection refines her pre-understandings in an effort to develop what Gadamer calls "legitimate prejudices". In this way, the tacit knowledge of a psychobiographer or any other social scientist is both an asset and a liability (Freeman, 1984). Consider, on the one hand, how Freud's own life experience appears to have distorted his psychobiography of Leonardo.

Having just undergone what he described as "my Indian summer of eroticism", Freud advances the unsupportable thesis that Leonardo, too, enjoyed a "further energetic advance" in libido during his early 50's (Elms, 1988, p.37). This projection so blinds Freud that he proceeds to make uncharacteristically biased analyses. On the hand, for anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, personal experience yielded insight. Writing after the untimely death of his wife, Rosaldo explains how his own suffering allowed him to comprehend "the force of anger possible in bereavement" and simultaneously to understand that rage not "exchange theory" informed the bereaved Ilongot's practice of headhunting (Rosaldo, 1989, p.7). In both cases, the scholar's experience positioned them in particular relation to their subject—in one instance blinding and in another clarifying. Even more salient, both cases were revised in light of further understandings. In Freud's case, later scholars wrote biographies of Leonardo. In Rosaldo's he, himself improved upon his initial interpretation. Valid knowledge, in the narrative framework, assumes subjectivity is as essential as it is unavoidable.

Conclusion

In sum, this review has examined how psychobiography was necessarily marginalized within the natural science paradigm. It could not produce universal laws, it could not guarantee objectivity, it could not be replicated. In adopting the epistemological rules of the human science paradigm, the practice finds a far more fruitful place for itself. By employing a narrative approach, psychobiography can offer "an understanding" rather than an explanation of a person. This understanding, grounded as it is in the biographer's subjectivity as well as the subject's expressions incorporates historical facts but is not a reducible to such facts. In order to accomplish this, narrative-based psychobiography aims, as I said initially, to convey a feeling of what it was like to be a given person. Interpreting this person's expressions in light of her historical period, her actions, her contradictions, examining how these converge to suggest a given analysis, a narrative-based psychobiography attempts to render a person in all her depth. Moreover, like psychoanalysis, this psychobiography strives to make a place for the irrational by leaving open the questions that cannot be resolved in this particular moment historical time and in the particular psyche of a given psychobiographer.

As my project involves understanding a creator, Anne Sexton, Dufrenne's analysis of the phenomenology of the aesthetic object is particularly salient. Though Dufrenne is not a narrative theorist, the theoretical vision he offers furthers narrative theory by specifying *how* a biographer (or in my case a psychobiographer) might grasp her subject in her entirety and her depth. By entirety and depth, what I mean here is not only in her actions, her speech, her relationships, but also in the aspect of her being that she lives out of but that has yet to be revealed; in that part of her that is not readily available to her consciousness or to external observation. Derrida holds that the heart of our being resides in what is secret within us, in what we can never be made amenable to language "Authentic mystery (of a person) must remain mysterious, and we should approach it only by letting it be what it is in truth--veiled..."(Derrida, 1995, p.37). Dufrenne intimates that by looking to art we come as close as anyone might to sensing the nature of the unnamable secret that defines the artist's being. For the aesthetic object allows us to grasp the whole woman whose being is at once "indefinable and inescapable" (Dufrenne, 1973, p.99). It is through the world of the aesthetic object that we sense "the shape of the artist's being, the unity of her personal style" (Dufrenne, 1973, p.99). It is through the world of the aesthetic object that we come to know the "truth of the artist which is present in the work... which history itself must take into account" (Dufrenne, 1973, p.98).

Such a truth is not one that can be found by piecing together biographical facts about the artist's life or even by synthesizing the artist's own stories with those that other's tell of her. For this truth is not necessarily one that even the artist, herself, fully knows. As Dufrenne explains, "I can believe his (the artist's) words to be sincere without believing them to be true,... This spontaneous mistrust is probably due to my feeling of powerlessness of the self to know itself and, at the same time, of the feeling of incommunicablility of consciousness" (Dufrenne, 1973, p.100). In other words, for Dufrenne the aesthetic object is incisive, insightful, and complete in its revelation in a manner that the artist and even the artist's inner circle can never be.

In view of this analysis, Dufrenne proposes that the psychobiographer reverse her way of working. Rather than working piecemeal in an attempt to assemble the vestiges of the artist as best we can into a recognizable portrait, Dufrenne suggests that the psychobiographer work out of her direct experience of the artist's presence as she encounters that presence in the aesthetic object. Anchoring her analysis in this presence, the psychobiographer can then describe, "everything immediately meaningful and coherent which this presence includes" (Dufrenne, 1973, p.99).

In the three papers that follow, I use Dufrenne to guide my analysis. I work to describe Anne Sexton's countenance, to render a psychobiographical understanding of Anne Sexton, by looking at how she is revealed by her poetry. In each poem, I explore the same question: How did it happen that the poetry to which she was devoted, first succeeded and then failed to save her? In the first poem, I explore Sexton in love by looking at a love poem, *Pain for a Daughter*, which she writes to and for her eldest daughter Linda. In the second paper, I study Sexton in her body by looking at two poems she writes about the power of touch *The Touch* and *The Truth the Dead Know*. In the third paper, I examine Sexton in the process of revising her work by looking at *Letter Written While Crossing Long Island Sound*. Each of these works allow me to look on Sexton in slightly different contexts. By looking through these three different poems and by asking each time the same question, I hope to open an understanding of Anne Sexton that has not heretofore been offered.

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Anne Sexton: A Psychological Portrait

PAPER I

Love and the Writer

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Love and the Writer

During a spring 1966 television interview Sexton refers to *Pain for a Daughter* as a "love poem." Struck by this reference, I thought perhaps I might look to this poem to garner some sense of life's promise as Sexton understood it. What I found, however was a problematic conception of love that reveals as much about Anne's desire to die as it does about her capacity to live. On the one hand, love, as Sexton conceives it in *Pain for a Daughter* (1966) (see Appendix A for complete poem) is destructive. Insisting on a narcissistic intimacy, this love obliterates the beloved. On the other hand, love as Sexton manifests it in the sheer music of her poetry is constitutive: allowing her to realize devout intimacies, this love makes possible a self. In examining *Pain for a Daughter*, I would like to explore how art both saves and fails to save Anne Sexton by making her contradictory ways of loving manifest.

Pain for a Daughter

Written for her eldest daughter, Linda, *Pain for a Daughter* details the way in which a mother watches as her pre-adolescent daughter suffers. The daughter, as the mother-narrator tells it, progresses from one blinding passion to the next while tending her beloved horses. First, blind with love, she aches to mount "those long necked marchers and churners." Then "blind with loss," she loses her pony to distemper. Then "blind with pain" she agonizes as the thoroughbred stands on her foot, and last "blind with fear," she undergoes the "rites of the cleansing"--the application of hydrogen peroxide to her injured toes. Strangely, throughout this love poem, the mother-narrator stands at a distance. Even in the daughter's hour of need, it is the girl's father who tends her wounds while her mother looks on from the doorway. The poem climaxes when the daughter cries out in agony, *"Oh my God help me!"* In this moment the poem opens out into its full ambiguity. The lines that follow show how the mother-narrator and her daughter might be at once estranged and connected by this event. In the course of this paper I will explore these different interpretations to allow us to better understand Anne Sexton the writer and Anne Sexton the suicide.

A Love that Destroys: Pain for a Daughter (1965)

Describing a daughter's love for horses,[2] Sexton reveals that love, as she understands it, is as treacherous as it is necessary. In the early stanzas of *Pain for a Daughter*, Sexton shows how touch between lover and beloved entails excruciating pain. The lover, in this case the daughter, is ravished by the beloved, her horse, in the course of knowing it. That is, in the process of communing with the beloved, part of the daughter's own flesh, is destroyed:

> He (the horse) grew into her foot until they were one.
>
> The marks of the horseshoe printed into her flesh, the tips of her toes
>
> ripped off like pieces of leather

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[2] The winter before Linda turns 12 she decides she wants to learn to ride, 1964. The summer of 1965, she goes away to riding camp at Highlawn Farm and continues to do so until she was 16. (L. Sexton, 1994, p.99).

To be with another, as the daughter is, is to allow oneself to be crushed by that other, to lose or to give up part of who one is.

In the face of these obvious dangers, Sexton attempts to fashion a different kind of love to tie mother and daughter. The closing stanza of *Pain for a Daughter* depicts a disembodied, ideal mother-love that can be near the daughter but not touch her. In part, Sexton's ideal is shaped by her own inability to love in lived time. Unable to get her daughter lunch,[3] to see her off safely to nursery school,[4] or to put a potato in the oven for the family dinner,[5] Sexton's mothering constitutes neglect. In formulating an ideal love that is distant, not involved in the mundane acts of caring, Sexton attempts, in part, to evade the difficulties such hands-on care presents for her. At the same time, Sexton's ideal love is also informed by her intuition that love, as she lives it--demanding unlimited emotional access to the beloved--endangers her daughter. Obliquely aware that her way of relating to Linda is flawed, Sexton, explains to the reporter in her 1966 television interview, "I don't want to love her (Linda) too much. I don't want to hurt her." Given these constraints mother-love, in *Pain for a Daughter*, takes an unorthodox form.

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[3] Anne confesses to her psychiatrist, Dr. Orne, "I have time to cuddle them but not to get their lunch" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.36).

[4] In her biography, Linda recounts how Sexton closed the door on a teary eyed, two-year old Linda as a way of sending her off to nursery school held next door in the neighbor's basement. Shy and scared, Linda hid in the garage three days in a row until it was time to come home. At last Mrs. Grant called to see why she had not been attending and Anne discovered what had really happened. (L. Sexton, 1994, p. 83).

[5] Kayo calls once on his way home from a sales trip to ask Anne to put potatoes in the oven for dinner and to his outrage she fails even this simple request. (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 138).

Sexton constructs a world in which the daughter is unreachable, ensconced in layers of pain, moreover the mother stands at a distance, regarding her daughter from the doorway. Only the mother's presence is permitted transit through the mewling sound of her words. These words move, moreover, not in real time, but in imagined time, reaching the daughter as she is torn in childbirth or entering death:

and then she cries...
Oh my God help me!
Where a child would have cried *Mama!*
Where a child would have believed *Mama!*
she bit the towel and called on God
and I saw her life stretch out...
I saw her torn in childbirth,
and I saw her, at that moment,
in her own death and I knew that she
knew.

Love, then, is set apart from the daughter in both time and space. Given only as a shared and abstract knowing, Sexton hopes this love will console without harming. Yet no gentler than the earthy, immediate love between a girl and her horse, the love of a mother for her daughter also diminishes the beloved.

In an effort to ameliorate the daughter's terror and her aloneness, the mother-narrator in *Pain for a Daughter* offers a distant, all-seeing, all-knowing love, "I saw her torn in childbirth,/and I saw her, at that moment,/in her own death and I knew that she knew." But as the mother-narrator is not God, this offer constrains the daughter. It presumes that the daughter's life will not exceed that which, she, the mother has known. It presumes that mother and daughter share but one fate, the mother's fate. This presumption circumscribes the daughter's life even as it offers the consolation of mutuality. Consistent with this act is the fact that the daughter in the poem has no voice. The mother-narrator tells her story, completely, such that the daughter has no existence separate from that which the mother tells. Distance has not protected the daughter as the mother might have hoped. Separated by time and space, connected only through presence and imagination--love is problematic for this mother and this daughter as well as the artist who renders them. As Sexton realizes it in language, love compromises the beloved: cutting off a part of her being, not only her toes, but also her possible futures.

A Love that Destroys: "Double Image" (1961)

This recognition is not unique to *Pain for a Daughter*. Both early and late in her poetic career, Sexton grapples with this problematic conception of love, varying the elements but never breaking the basic gestalt. Writing *Double Image*, (1960) (see Appendix B for complete poem) for example, in fall of 1958, the aspiring poet explicitly acknowledges how she, like her mother before her, is guilty of an narcissistic love. Both Mary Gray Harvey, Anne's mother, and Anne Harvey Sexton see their respective daughters as their own double image. Both are unable to love their daughter's self where it lives,[6] "Too late to be forgiven now, the witches said,/ I wasn't exactly forgiven. They (my parents) had my portrait/ done instead"(A. Sexton, 1960, p. 36). When Anne needs forgiveness in the wake of her first suicide attempt in November of 1956, her mother refuses and "has her portrait done instead" (A. Sexton, 1960, p.36). Painted by her mother's portrait painter, holding her mother's pose, with her hair restyled at her mother's request, Anne can be made to look the very image of Mary Gray Harvey:

> In the north light, my smile is held in place,
> the shadow marks my bone...
> ...In the south light, her smile is held in place,
> her cheeks wilting like a dry
> orchid: my mocking mirror, my overthrown
> love, my first image.
> Double Image.

In attempting to love and care for her daughter whose mental illness has brought her home to live like an outgrown child: "I lived like an angry guest/ like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child"(A. Sexton, 1960, p. 37). Mary Gray is capable finally of loving only her own image . Such narcissism destroys. While the daughter is neglected and misapprehended, the mother is ensnared and paralyzed by an encounter with herself that ultimately isolates her. As Anne describes her in *Double Image*, the mother becomes "that double woman who stares at herself, as if she were petrified in time" (A. Sexton, 1960, p.41).

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[6] "Today, my small child, Joyce,/love your self's self where it lives" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.36).

To a degree Mary Gray's narcissistic love does "petrify" her. She ages and does not mature. She remains self-centered, unable to grasp how her casual, disparaging remarks affect Anne . When Anne asked if her mother could pay her fees as she wanted to enroll in Newton Junior College or Boston University in the Winter of 1956, Mary Gray replied, "No! Why should I? It seems to me I deserve some fun in my old age... You could never do the work. You have no idea of how hard it might be" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.46).

Despite or perhaps because of this selfishness, Mary Gray progresses through her life relatively untroubled by her narcissistic mother-love. Occupied by her own social stature, her husband, and her appearance, she regards her third daughter, Anne, as an ordinary fact of life.

In contrast, Anne takes Linda to be central to her existence. Unlike Mary Gray, Anne is deeply dependent on her eldest daughter and this intensity makes her narcissism more dangerous. Anne makes a practice of telling Linda about her life without reservation. Moreover, she expects Linda to reciprocate. Describing her mother's relentless candor, Linda explains:

> It was not only her sexual life about which she was frank. Mother discussed every aspect of her life--from the details of her flirtations, to which publications had accepted new poems, to gossip about friends, to news of Maxine (Sexton's best friend and colleague) and her daughters, to what Daddy had said or done on a variety of issues, complete with a rehash of the recent arguments between them. (L. Sexton , 1994, p. 109).

Anne deemed nothing "too private" to be shared between she and Linda. When Linda's psychiatrist calls Anne to insist that she back off and stop pressing Linda for "what she (Anne) liked best intimate details about intimate things," (L. Sexton, 1994, p. 98), Anne breaks down. As Linda reports this phone call: "After the conversation, Mother went into my closet and stood there crying, hanging on to my clothes!" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.325). Like her mother before her, Anne sees in her own daughter only a reflection not a child, but unlike Mary Gray, Anne craves this reflection and cannot bear to let it go.

Writing *Double Image* in 1958 about her second daughter Joy, who is then three, Anne achieves some insight into the nature of her own mother-love. The final stanza of the poem confesses:

> I who was never quite sure about being a girl, needed another
> life, another image to remind me.
> And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure
> nor soothe it. I made you to find me.

Acknowledging this "worst guilt," that "I made you to find me," to cure me, to soothe me, requires a great deal of Sexton as she struggles to regain custody of Joy after both extended families, the Sextons and the Harveys, deemed her unfit to care for her infant daughter.[7] Despite the risks, however, Anne dares to write this true poem, and in so doing she appears to grasp the dangerous nature of her mother-love. Yet to trace her subsequent poetry and her life, we find that this insight-- this insight that might have saved Anne Sexton-- is not repeated, extended or amplified. Rather it is neglected--to Sexton's detriment as an artist and her destruction as a mother. Late in the summer of 1969, nine years after writing *Double Image* and four years after writing *Pain for a Daughter*, Anne Sexton is sexually intimate with her eldest daughter Linda.

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[7] Offering her poem to her mentor, De Snodgrass, for his review, Sexton explains, "Everyone said I wasn't good for them, (her children)...I do not dare write this true poem..." (Middlebrook, 1991,p.85).

A Love that Destroys: Life (1969)

Having developed a practice of going to Linda's bed and "cuddling" when struck by insomnia, Sexton was already in the habit of using her daughter to satisfy her needs. When confronted about this practice by her psychiatrist Dr. Orne in 1963, Sexton explains: "..I can save myself through my children because there's a bond" (Middelbrook, 1991, p. 204). Tragically having both confessed and disavowed the flawed nature of her love, Sexton imposes on her daughter the very alienation that she imagines in *Pain for a Daughter* is most terrifying. That is, she requires that her daughter bear a terrible pain and that she do so alone. For the tabooed nature of the pain makes it almost as painful to speak as it is to suffer.

Recall that in *Pain for a Daughter*, the daughter must endure the pain of iodine on crushed toenails. More than this, however, this daughter must suffer the further terror of her own aloneness, her unreachableness. Submerged in her pain, the daughter becomes strange to the world, "eyes locked on the ceiling, eyes of a stranger." She no longer belongs to the father who ministers to her or the mother who looks on. Like this fictive girl in *Pain for a Daughter*, Linda Sexton's pain is also compounded by the terror. Linda, too, has been made strange. She is victim not only of incest, but of mother-daughter incest. As Linda reports it, "....Nobody believes there *is* such a thing as mother-daughter incest: it's not in Freud.." (L. Sexton, 1994, p.107). What Linda suffers then isolates her both from her social-cultural milieu and from her mother.

Ironically, where in her love poem, Sexton's mother-narrator offers "knowing" as a comfort to an estranged daughter, in the lived years that follow Linda's abuse, Sexton's insistence on knowing offer just the opposite. Linda can find no safe way to relate to a mother for who regards her as "my extension," and "my prayer." Writing the sixteen-year-old Linda on July 23, 1969, a year after her incestuous overture Sexton says: "I love you. You are the closest to my heart, closer than any other human being. You are my extension. You are my prayer. You are my belief in God. For better or for worse you inherit me" (L. Sexton, 1991, p. 342).

Making no attempt to hide or censor the narcissistic nature of her love, Sexton features it as a measure of her devotion. Implying that she knows Linda, who is but her "extension," and claiming that they are wedded for all time in this knowing, "For better or for worse you inherit me," Sexton attempts to appropriate Linda as the absolute support and faith ("you are my prayer") of her life. Tragically, having both confessed in *Double Image* and disavowed in life the narcissistic nature of her love, Anne Sexton becomes deeply lost in that "cave of the mirror" (A. Sexton, 1960, p.41). That is, Sexton becomes raptly caught up in an image of Linda that blatantly disregards her as a daughter and reflects only Anne and her regressive desire for a perfect mother.

A Love that Destroys: "Keeping the City" (1976)

As her incestuous advances upon Linda ruin her relationship with her daughter, so too, the conception of love that underlies such advances arrests her poetry. After this event, Sexton does not write another "love poem" to her daughter until late in her life.[8] When she does so in *Keeping the City* (1976) (see Appendix C for complete poem), she manages only to reinstate the same treacherous conception of love that *Double Image* confesses ("I made you to find me"), and *Pain for a Daughter* enacts. Recall that the mother-narrator in *Pain for a Daughter* sees in her daughter's life only her own. Similarly, in *Keeping the City* the knowing/ seeing that the parent-narrator offers serves only to put the child-figure at risk. Conscious that her love is prone to trespass, Sexton creates a parent-figure in *Keeping the City* who is even more distant than the mother-narrator in *Pain for a Daughter*. Not only is this parent-narrator eventually placed miles away, he is also made silent.

> and I (the watchman) was silent

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[8] Sexton does write other poems about Linda, but none qualify as love poems in the sense *that Pain for a Daughter* does. None show a mother-narrator figure attempting to give of herself to her child. In 1971 she publishes *Rapunzel*, a poem seemingly celebrating--in fairytale form--the very incest she has committed. This poem shows how an old woman might desire to keep and use a young woman as a lover because "a woman who loves a woman is forever young." In 1971 she also publishes *Snow White* a poem that tells of the old witch's jealous suffering in the face of a young girl's emerging womanhood. In 1971 she also writes *Mother and Daughter*, a confrontational poem in which a young beautiful maiden banishes a destitute crone. This poem stands an accusation that Sexton alleges against her teenage daughters who in maturing have drawn away from her (adapted from Middlebrook, 1991, p. 348).

> attentive
>
> the watchman (...)
>
> if I spoke, (I) would hurt the bird of your soul.

At the same time, however, because the parent-narrator loves the child, he is immediately implicated in an intrusive relationship. In fact *Keeping the City* opens, shockingly, with an image of physical intimacy wherein the parent figure rests his head upon the child's chest so that he might know all that is within the child:

> Once
>
> in August,
>
> head on your chest.
>
> I heard wings
>
> battering up the place,
>
> something inside trying to fly out

Placing the parent figure "head on your chest," Sexton summons into her writing an old practice that can be seen as a forerunner to her eventual sexual intimacy with Linda. In choosing this phrase, Sexton shows how she allows her writing to become a defensive, regressive act rather than an emancipatory one. The phrase "head on your chest" refers to a game called "Playing Nine." In the game, Sexton would insist that the nine-year-old Linda cradle and play "Mama" to the thirty-four year old Anne who would lie head on her daughter's chest. Telling Dr. Orne about this game in 1962, Sexton relates: "She (Linda) really wanted me to be thirty-four"

(Middlebrook, 1991, p.204). Despite her daughter's pleas, however, Anne would refuse. Relating this incident to Dr. Orne, Sexton explains: "I'd say, 'Oh I want to be nine,' and I wouldn't do it" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.204). Her refusal disturbed her daughter. Reporting one instance when she played this game, Sexton tells Dr. Orne, how Linda started crying and begging her mother to resume her role. Sexton explains, Linda kept "trying to say some magic thing like 'I want you back'" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.204).

Even in retrospect, Sexton is unable to hear her child's plea amidst the cacophony of her own desire. Her pleasure in this game distorts her interpretation of events, such that referring to Linda's frightened cry, "I want you back," Anne, can say, "I really liked it" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.204). In short she likes the way in which her daughter reflects her to herself. She can see in Linda's pleading, her own double image calling her back: Linda's desperation echoing her own. And this gratifies her.

Though Sexton's attempt to distance the watchman from the one he guards and making him silent ("and I was silent/ and attentive,/ the watchman.") suggests that she is aware of the imminent danger her love poses, her decision to place the watchman "head on your chest" shows how stuck she has become. In her writing as in her life, Sexton insists that love cannot help but entail bodily intimacy, and intimacy cannot help but mean knowing another's inner world as you do your own. To know the other in this absolute way--obliterating the other's mystery--is, of course, not to know her, but merely to impose yourself upon her.

Sexton's way of imaging the child-figure both as Linda and as herself underscores this claim. Referring to the child-figure as the one who "had gone miles away, tearing down, rebuilding the fortress,"[9] Sexton alludes to Linda who has left home for Harvard. *The Fortress* (see Appendix D for complete poem) is the title of a poem Sexton publishes in 1961 depicting the pleasures she and Linda shared while watching a pheasant strut by Linda's bedroom window in the rain. In declaring "you had gone miles away, tearing down, ... the fortress," Sexton is referring to Linda who in her departure both emotionally and physically to college has torn down the absolute, inviolable intimacy of their mother-daughter realm. At the same time, by referring to the child figure in *Keeping the City* as "You with your twelve tongues and twelve wings," Sexton alludes to herself. For in *Her Kind* (1960) (see Appendix E for complete poem) the signature poem she traditionally uses to open her readings, she identifies herself as "lonely thing, 12-fingered, out of mind" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.15). Confusing her daughter and herself in the same child-figure, referring to this figure both as "the fortress" and as "you with your twelve-tongues," Sexton shows how, even in her writing, her images of her child are hopelessly entangled with her images of herself. No matter that she has lived out the consequences of what she sometimes refers to her as her "overabundance of love", in the most terrible way possible, mother-daughter incest (L. Sexton, 1994, p. 119). No matter that she has taken from herself, with her own transgression, her dearest daughter. Still, she cannot re-conceive mother-love in another form.

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[9] "Since then I was more silent/ though you had gone miles away,/ tearing down, rebuilding the fortress./ I was there but could do nothing/ but guard the city/ lest it break./ I was silent" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.495).

On the contrary, she is compelled instead to present the mother-narrator's invasive practices as tenderness and love. And so Sexton extends into her art the terrible projection that has marred her mothering in life. Earlier poetic achievements in *Double Image*--in which she recognizes the dangers of narcissistic mother-love--and *Pain for a Daughter*--in which she manages to instantiate a devout mother-love side by side her narcissistic love--are now abandoned. Blocking the insights these early works afford, the author of *Keeping the City* proves no more enlightened than the thirty-five year old Sexton who assuages her insomnia by crawling into bed with Linda, and then defends this practice to Dr. Orne in 1963, claiming: "Her (Linda's) body wants my body; she loves to cuddle" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 204). Rather than open up other possible worlds, late works such as *Keeping the City* solidify the realm of her narcissism. The poetry that once dared to show her to herself now merely obscures her. Unable to clarify the dangerous nature of her love, she merely reverts guardedly but tenaciously to it: positioning the parent-narrator "miles away" but "head on you chest" presuming to know that child's body and her life as if she owned it, as if in fact the child lay still within her womb "all bloody and gluey."

Once in August,
head on your chest,
I heard wings

battering up the place,

(...)

it was you untying the snarls and knots,

the webs, all bloody and gluey;

The regression apparent in her poetry, is equally apparent in her living. Indeed, as Anne Sexton nears the end of her life, her attempts to connect with Linda adhere more and more rigidly to the failed pattern wherein she treats her daughter as an extension of herself. As the maturing Linda increasingly resists such treatment, Sexton coerces her. For example, without asking Linda's preferences in July of 1974, she assigns the twenty-one year old Linda the task of serving as her literary editor. When Linda protests, "You never asked me about this." Sexton replies airily, "I knew you'd want to do it"(Sexton, L., 1994, p.182).[10] In doing so, she negates her daughter's dismay insinuating that "mother knows best" what this daughter wants and is. And in making this presumption, Anne Sexton re-enacts the maternal narcissism depicted in *Double Image* and *Pain for a Daughter*. That is, she sees in her daughter only her own image and only her own life. As ruinous as such narcissistic love is for her own flesh and blood, it is at least equally so for Anne Sexton the woman and Anne Sexton the artist.

In this past section I have looked at *Pain for a Daughter* to show how treacherous Sexton's conception of love can be. Also, I have examined how in

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[10] Linda reports, "I wasn't sure I wanted to join my life, myself, to her life in this way--even after death. Not at all" (L. Sexton, 1994, p.182).

Double Image Sexton struggles to confront this problem and how in *Keeping the City* she struggles--to her detriment--to evade it. In the next section, I would like to look again at *Pain for a Daughter* to understand how, at times, poetry succeeds in transcending the problems inherent in Anne Sexton's conception of love and so redeems her.

Love that Constitutes: Pain for a Daughter

> "But what is striking for our purposes is that man shows himself most clearly as the image of God in his inner self-presence and self-love" (Taylor 1989, p.136).

Unable to love in a less ruinous way, Sexton is driven both to despair and to write. She despairs because she both needs and dreads love. She writes because through poetry, at least at times, she can momentarily tolerate this dilemma. In a poem (as its writer and possibly its reader) Anne Sexton can sometimes exist in a different modality--a modality whose quasi-musical qualities permit her to be "...altogether what I was--/a woman of excess, of zeal and greed" (A. Sexton, 1981, p. 537). For it is in the music of poetry, the resonances, that she is able to love; that is, it is in the music of poetry that she is able to summon a self-presence. To illumine this point I will offer two additional interpretations of *Pain for a Daughter*. In the first, I will show how this poem might permit her to love her daughter, and in the next I will show how *Pain for a Daughter* might permit her to love her self.

Love for a Daughter

As I have previously discussed, the mother-narrator in *Pain for a Daughter* assumes a distant, disengaged stance with regard to her daughter. It is not until the climax in which the daughter is blinded with pain that another possibility emerges.

Consider first what occurs in this climax as Sexton renders it in *Pain for a Daughter*:

> She bites on a towel, sucked in breath
> sucked in and arched against the pain,
> her eyes glancing off me where
> I stand at the door, eyes locked
> on the ceiling, eyes of a stranger
> and then she cries...
> *Oh my God, help me!*

Though the actual punctuation of this passage would suggest the daughter's eyes are the ones that are successively glancing off her mother, locking on the ceiling and assuming the look of a stranger, the line breaks suggest otherwise. The line breaks sever the continuity given through repetition (eyes glancing, eyes locking, eyes of a stranger) and allow us, instead, to associate "eyes" with the mother. We might read simply, "I (the mother-narrator) stand at the door, eyes locked/ on the ceiling," In short, the shape of the poem upon the page, the way the lines are set and broken, leads the reader to a double reading-- a reading whose meaning shifts like a figure/ground drawing depending on our focus. The shifting meaning alternately places the mother and then the daughter into a pain so excruciating that each locks her eyes on the ceiling and becomes a stranger to her own family. Riveted inward with pain, the mother and alternately the daughter are profoundly alone.

This blurring of the daughter and the mother-narrator prefigures the poem's epiphany[11] in which the mother knows (and in this way is *with*) her daughter in times of overwhelming pain

> and I saw her life stretch out...
> I saw her torn in childbirth,
> and I saw her, at that moment,
> in her own death and I knew that she
> knew.

Borrowing from Ricouer, I will hold that, "It is by means of feeling that we inhabit the world" (Ricouer, 1975/1985, p.69). If this claim holds, could the ambiguity in this last stanza prefigure the poem's epiphany? For this ambiguity suggests that in the course of telling her story, the mother-narrator has momentarily felt anew what the daughter feels for the first time. That is, she, the narrator, has fleetingly assumed the same isolated position in the world that the daughter assumes: "eyes locked on the ceiling, eyes of a stranger." Made strange by the intensity of the pain, the one who suffers endures not only that pain, but the further terror of her own aloneness. Having inhabited the world through this feeling, from this position all her life, the narrator is moved suddenly by the possibility that another might have undergone her heretofore-incommunicable experience.

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[11] I use the word epiphany here in the way James Joyce defines it. For Joyce epiphany did not mean the manifestation of godhead, the showing forth of Christ to the Magi, ... For Joyce epiphany meant the sudden revelation of the whatness of a thing. The whatness that could be seen in moments of fullness or of passion. The artist, Joyce felt, was charged with such revelations, and it was his task to look for them not among gods but among men, in casual, unostentatious, even unpleasant moments (adapted from Ellmann, R., 1982, p.84).

When the mother-narrator re-appears after this merging with her daughter, the narrator is re-situated in the world. Her perspective has expanded. Where once she watched her daughter in her day-to-day pining for and tending to horses, late in the poem she sees with clairvoyance the entirety of the daughter's life. She sees the daughter "torn in childbirth" and "at that moment, in her own death." She knows that her daughter who no longer calls "Mama" or believes "Mama" has crossed the threshold into adulthood in which "need is not quite belief." She knows that is, the daughter has entered the realm in which moments of deep pain place her outside the reach of those who love her and not quite within the reach of God.

From this broader perspective, the early stanzas of the poem can be re-interpreted as the progression of life itself, moving from love, to loss, to pain, to fear. This progression, I would suggest might be read not just as the progression of the daughter's love for her beloved, but also as the inevitably bleak progression of life as the narrator-mother sees it: ending always in fear. Moreover, fear devastates at this juncture because the last and most disturbing pain occurs when the child can no longer believe "Mama," and so must suffer alone without that certain comfort.

Ironically, just as the poem makes this dark vision manifest, it restores the possibility of maternal love in a new form. Inextricably woven into the scene of the daughter's suffering is the watchful gaze of the mother who sees. This mother sees her daughter in childbirth and in death and knows what the daughter knows. This mother has seen the face of that darkness that the daughter confronts. And so this is Sexton's love poem. This is her gift to her daughter, this knowing, this seeing. This seeing is how she is *with* her daughter even as she, the daughter, cannot know it "her eyes glancing off me where/ I stand at the door."

The poem's closing line makes this understanding exist in a new form. Through the repetition of the word "knew," ("... and I knew that she knew") mother and daughter are linked sonorously--even where the story line of the poem holds them apart. Within the confines of the poem, Sexton has imaginatively constructed a mother-daughter relationship that transcends time, distance and life events: that exists on another plane in which resonance not action or even words make connection possible. Hence what a daughter could read, might read, should she turn to this poem is that the mother-narrator is loving her daughter as God would love, "Some say you see me only at a distance. Some say you have forgotten me altogether. Some say I move not without your knowing" (Anonymous,1960).

Love, in the poetic modality, dissipates terror through presence (the mother offers her knowing presence to the daughter) and may even reinstate being through touch (the mother touches the daughter sonorously, meeting her in the phrase "I knew that she knew". Love, as it exists, in the mewling sounds of words, is protective and constitutive. Such love is reminiscent of a mother's love for a young child. A mother's presence quells the child's fear. Her touch, her literal holding, as Winnicott (1971) calls it, makes the child to feel real.

Strange that this silent, primal maternal love is for Sexton all that a mother can offer a daughter coming of age. Strange that to connect mother and daughter through time, death, pain and terror, Sexton--who lives in words--conjures only presence and touch. And yet perhaps these are the qualities which allow poetry to transform and redeem as Sexton claims it can.

Love for a Self

If *Pain for a Daughter* allows a mother to love her daughter, perhaps also it allows a mother to love her self. What if, in fact, the love in this poem is not so much *for* the daughter as *for* the mother. What if the presence that dissipates terror in this work is not the mother's presence for her daughter (how could it be--the daughter is not aware of that presence in the poem and may never be) but rather the mother's own self-presence and self-love?

Recall that the mother-narrator in *Pain for a Daughter* has been estranged. She has stood at the door--connected to life only by looking. The daughter meanwhile has been living life. Alive in her pain and sensuality the daughter is *with* her pony as its "jaw blooms in distemper," she is *with* her thoroughbred as the "small hipped English seat burns like a furnace under her." The mother, however, simply looks on from a distance.

In this last stanza, however, Sexton shifts the focus of the poem to the mother. The daughter's movement becomes simply a crying out. Against this relative stillness, the mother-narrator's subtle emerging movement can be detected. Where early in the poem, the mother-narrator's "seeing" was invisible, tacit--it merely allowed her to report her daughter's myriad comings and goings--in the last stanza of the poem, the seeing itself becomes an object. Named and then foregrounded through repetition, the word stands out: "I saw her life stretch out...I saw her torn in childbirth...and I saw her, at the moment of her own death." As the mother-narrator's seeing becomes objectified, it also acquires a feeling.[12] Tied to God, death, and birth, the act of seeing comes to embody a sense of expanse, distance and timelessness.

And what the poem permits at this moment, is it permits the reader--and here I include Anne Sexton as a "reader"--to feel the mother-narrator's experience. Poetry has made seeing palpable. Sexton can touch it; it can touch her--and yet not in the ordinary sense of the word. Rather as Dufrenne describes aesthetic experience, "I imbue myself with the object by making myself consubstantial with it" (Dufrenne, 1973, p.395). Suffused then with the feeling of seeing Sexton, too, assumes the dimensions of vastness--such that she might leave the poem with the mother's words ringing in her ears, "I knew that she knew," and the mother's presence emanating in and through her--full of dread, love, passion, despair and fidelity. At this moment, author and poem are not so radically estranged. Rather they are entwined and bringing each other into belonging and into being with one another: transforming the etiolating effects of loneliness into the benediction of solitude.

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[12] Thank you to Don Kuiken for the question that prompted this thought.

Loneliness as the Absence of Self

Though both loneliness and solitude are conditions of being alone, they each imply very different relations to the self. To be lonely is to be without one's self. And the self I refer to here is the one Taylor (1989) describes as an orientation:

> To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. p.27

and as a language:

> To study persons is to study beings who exist in, or are partly constituted by, a certain language. p. 35

In sum Taylor proposes that identity is defined both by my stance, by the underlying values and beliefs that inform my allegiances and by the language with which I narrate my experience. To be lonely, then, in Taylor's view is to be "radically uncertain" about what is of value to one. We can only be so uncertain if we are estranged from our body. In this case, our uncertainty manifests as an inability to feel[13] and an inability to live in language. To be lonely then is to lack a lived language community within which one can formulate self-interpretations and thereby come to know one's self.

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[13] Sexton repeatedly refers throughout her poetry to her suffering as a frozenness: "Home is ... the great orange bed where we lie/ like two frozen paintings..." (A. Sexton, 1976, p.510), "the trouble is I'd let my gestures freeze," (A. Sexton, 1962, p.174).

As a young adult, Anne Sexton is lonely. Her radical uncertainty (about what is of value), strips even functional, every day tasks of their meaning. Describing her suffering to Dr. Orne, she writes:

> I am so alone nothing seems worthwhile... I walk from room to room trying to think of something to do.. for a while I will do something, make cookies or clean the bathroom--make beds--answer the telephone--but all along I have this almost terrible energy in me and nothing seems to help (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 36).

Even as her life as a poet builds and grows she is prone to this profound sense of aimlessness. Writing to her first mentor, De Snodgrass in February 1961, she reports how she has published a total of eight poems and is due to give a reading at Amherst College. These achievements, however, count for nothing more than making beds in the face of her depression. That is, the fact of her success does not serve to orient her any more than does the fact of her wifely duties. As she writes to Snodgrass on February 17, 1961,

> Despite all my seemingly good news and all.. I seem to be full of despair this winter..each grim and bleak day follows another... wish someone were in love with me or that I was having a wild affair or something. (L. Sexton, 1991, p. 121).

This wish speaks of her loneliness--and her loneliness is not merely to be with someone who understands her. If this were the case, writing her poet-mentor might help. De is someone she trusts and loves. But writing De is not enough. Her loneliness, her desire for a "wild affair," expresses her deep sense of emptiness as well as a concomitant need to be filled with a strong evaluation, to be deeply committed by some feeling. In short, she wishes to be rescued from the morass of her despair in which nothing matters and re-situated in a distinct framework wherein she is made to be by her own strong evaluation or in her words "loves." That is, she wishes to be oriented so that her loneliness, her radical uncertainty will drop away and she can *be* a self.

Her recourse is language. Recall Taylor (1989) contends that the self consists in language. Sexton uses language to retrieve her self. That is, by naming and expressing the condition of her soul, she re-possesses her *self*. As she is lost and without direction she adopts disorientation as a descriptor. She does not confront it by making more profound commitments rather she co-opts it by making it one of her self-interpretations. In doing so, she changes it. She makes her emptiness into a point of identification. Note how she refers to herself as "being blown by trade winds" but her tone is not desperate. Though self described as aimless, she is not frightened or made lonely by this aimlessness--as she was when as a young mother she could not find purpose in keeping house or caring for her children. Rather writing Snodgrass in November 1958 her tone is seductive. She muses:

> But if time keeps me whole enough and a living reading writer of my day.. perhaps I will go to some conference.. The future is a fog that is still hanging out over the sea, a boat that floats home or does not. The trade winds blow me, and I do not know where the land is; the waves fold over each other; they are in love with themselves; sleeping in their own skin; and I float over them and I do not know about tomorrow (L. Sexton, 1991, p. 41).

In this text, Sexton makes her lostness sensual. The winds that blow her about without clear direction are "in love with each other" and intertwined, "fold over each other," and asleep, "sleeping in their own skin". Sexton is located by this sensuality. She "floats over them" even as she contends that she does not "know about tomorrow" she is in touch with the feel of her lostness and so is not utterly without orientation. Moreover, in writing this text she is also soliciting Snodgrass' attention, directing him toward her own sensual being. That is to say, she has a purpose. She is not lonely, she is oriented.

Working in a different way but to similar effects, she writes to Robert Lowell. Seeking his help in gaining admission to his Boston University Writing class, she jocularly refers to her estranged condition as an aspect of her being,

> I hasten to add, since he (Mr. Wilder, the dean of admissions) may forget my name, that I am one of the vagrant applications that awaits your decision. He (the dean) asked me if I were connected with any publication. I am not. I am totally disconnected from everything. I did not mention my

> slim list of credits, thinking he might wonder WHAT I was talking about (L. Sexton, 1991, p.39).

Naming herself as "disconnected," "vagrant," directionless: "a boat that floats home or not"--even as she is firmly and purposefully working on becoming a poet by writing other poets--Sexton is drawing her own contours from within (L. Sexton, 1991, p.41). She is identifying her "self" with words such that what was once a nameless debilitating despair is now a characteristic of a particular woman-poet. Moreover, now that she has put her disorientation into words (making it alternatively seductive and humorous), she is not alone with it any longer. Rather she is regarding it, her disorientation, as fascinating and unique--a mark of who she is.

Writing has at least momentarily transformed emptiness into its opposite. Sexton has fashioned a self out of language. She has made it an object for herself and her reader to share between them. By writing of her self to another she has instituted a language community within which to make self-interpretations. Before elaborating on how this same process makes possible self-love and self-presence, I would like to briefly underscore the importance of such a language community in forming a self.[14]

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[14] At the same time I want to qualify this argument: It is also true that her ready reference to herself as directionless suggests how familiar, how close, this feeling is in her day to day existence. That is, though she may author the experience in words as she writes, when she is not writing, experience plays her. In other words, though she can temper her radical uncertainty when meaningfully engaged in the project of writing, she cannot eliminate it. Her potential chaos is ever-present as the backdrop against which she valorizes poetry. Hence on the occasion of her birthday, which is also the anniversary of her first suicide attempt, she writes, "I could be sitting around thinking about ways to kill myself but I would rather be writing poetry." Nov. 1957 (L. Sexton, 1991,p.52). Similarly, having suffered her mother's death and her father's stroke she writes, "The life of poetry is saving me (I hope) as something's are as bad as I've ever

To do so I will review Sexton's experience as a young mother in the pre-feminist Boston of the 1950's. Surrounded by a culture that figured children as a woman's ultimate joy, Sexton could not make sense of her experience. She found the emotional demands of caring for two young children overwhelming. Unable to voice her feelings she says nothing and resorts to bizarre behavior. When visiting her daughter, Joy, at her mother-in-law's house, (since Anne's first suicide attempt November 1955, Joy has resided with her mother-in-law) she refuses her mother-in-law's simple request to put on Joy's pajamas. Later explaining her behavior to her psychiatrist, Dr. Orne, she says: "I used to pretend that Joy wasn't mine" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.36). As she has no language with which to express her confounded emotions--her feelings of love, guilt, resentment, inferiority, shame and fear-- she resorts to the painful act of denying herself her own motherhood.

Even more radically, when her immediate community identifies her only as mother, she resorts to de-realizing her self in its entirety. As Diane Middlebrook reports, "After Joy's birth (August, 1955) when Linda was two years old, Sexton began going through what she later called 'terrible spells of depression' in which she became agitated, disoriented and subject to fits of feeling 'unreal' " (Middlebrook, 1991, p.31). Sequestered with just her children during Kayo's extended business trips, Sexton sees herself primarily through their eyes. This community, which speaks as much with its look as with its words, regales Anne with her own failure simply by staring at her beseechingly. Attempting to describe her experience to her psychiatrist, Anne explains: "If I didn't have (Linda) there to

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known. I am sometimes totally lost from the world"(L. Sexton, 1991, p.107 May 10 or 11 1960).

reflect my depression it wouldn't be so bad. Any demand is too much when I'm like this" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.73). Alone with her own inexpressible rage and humiliation, Sexton has no words with which to answer her mother-in-law's question: "Why aren't your children and your husband enough--why don't you just make it (poetry) a hobby?"(Middlebrook, 1991, p.152).

Those who might help her formulate a response to her mother-in-law's question are likewise arrested in their self-expression. Fellow poet, Adrienne Rich, recounts how she, Rich, subverts her own story when the young Sylvia Plath asks her advice about how to combine motherhood and writing. Relating this story later Rich says,

> I answered something very sage, like "It can be done, but you'd better think about it really hard." What I wanted to tell her was "Don't try," because I was in such despondency: I'd just had my third child, I was thirty, and I felt that in many ways my life was over, that I would never write again. I couldn't foresee a future different from the past two years of raising children and being almost continuously angry (Middlebrook, 1991, p.111).

With her potential language community muted, Sexton has only her male psychiatrist, Dr. Orne, to help her and as she points out, "How can you really know what I mean--you have never been worn down by a nagging child" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 63). In fact, articulating her experience in motherhood to Dr. Orne only deepens her despair in 1956:

> I had Joy for the weekend and she has gone back today--I love her, she is adorable and winning --but it seems to take so much patience and energy and I was glad to see her go...I guess I don't love anyone--that is a terrible statement and now I am crying, my heart pounds and its all I can hear.. my feeling for my children does not surpass my desire to be free of their demands upon my emotions.. What have I got? Who would want to live feeling this way? (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 37).

For even Orne's willingness to listen does not constitute the kind of language community Anne requires. He is not like Sexton attempting to voice a tabooed story. He is not like her desperate, mired in guilt and facing the hard reality that to speak her experience is only to heighten her pain. In short, his capacity to help her make and explore herself with words is limited. Unable to find a language community in her Boston suburb, or her extended family or even her psychiatrist, Sexton is lonely. She is lonely for words that would make her self to be. She is lonely for a self.

Solitude as the Restitution of Self

Against this understanding of her loneliness--as an absence of self-- I would like to describe her poetry as a solitude that makes possible a restitution of the self, if only for short periods of time. Solitude, unlike loneliness, is a condition in which we are richly imbued with a sense of self. Our way of using the words suggests as much. To be "in" solitude is to be located, to have a place, to move in a certain space--or perhaps even--to rest in that space, to find "an angle of repose"

(Stegner, 1971). Similarly to be a self is to be located, "to be oriented in a moral space" (Taylor, 1989, p.28). In short both solitude and self presuppose space-analogues. If we accept this concordance, our next question becomes, how might poetry open up such an inner milieu? Ricouer suggests that poetry opens space by invoking in us a feeling. Feeling, as Ricouer defines it, is more than a sensual awareness or even "a disturbance of the soul" (Ricouer, 1975/85, p.69). Feeling, for Ricouer, "delineates a manner of situating oneself, or orienting oneself within the world" (Ricouer, 1975/85, p.69). Feeling, in short, is akin to what Taylor (1989) describes as "strong evaluations," moral and emotional commitments.

To better understand this process by which writing allows Anne to be a self, consider her own account of how reading permits her to feel. Having read Tillie Olsen's short story *Tell Me a Riddle*, she writes: "I read and then I talk back to it (the story) and I say, 'But you are not my life. I don't understand you. I haven't really lived you! Why do you hurt; why fill me with terror and beauty?...It is so alive that now I have lived it" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.236). Attempting to represent her experience of reading, Sexton addresses the story directly, she asks: "how is it that you make me to feel hurt, and fear, and beauty?" Though she rhetorically asks how the story can make her feel, her direct address implies that she understands why. In speaking to the text as "you" she is treating it as what Dufrenne (1973) would call a "quasi-subject." Dufrenne suggests that a work of art, like a person has a subjectivity-- an inner complexity and coherence. This work bears within itself an expressive world with its own particular affective stance (adapted from E. Casey, 1973, p.xxvii in Dufrenne). In doing so, such a work acts as a quasi-subject. It can be engaged. It can be encountered in a way that brings about change. That is, it can affect the spectator. The very manner in which Sexton addresses Olsen's text, using direct address as she might with a person, suggests that Sexton experiences *Tell Me a Riddle* as a quasi-subject. Indeed, she speaks of the text as a subjectivity that can make her feel "hurt, fear and wonder" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.236).

Recall that to be known by another is for Sexton to be sane. In her words, "You are not crazy if you have one sane person to talk to" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.142). Reading as Sexton experiences it: as an encounter with an "other" constitutes just such a "sane person." Sexton, herself, equates the two saying: "I hoard books they are people who do not leave" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.143).

Having been with *Tell Me a Riddle*, addressed it on its own terms, in its own world, Sexton leaves. She returns to her original audience, Tillie, and reports, "now I have lived it (the story)" (L. Sexton, 1991, p. 236). In first denying, "you are not my life" and then affirming, "now I have lived it," Sexton captures what she calls the "small miracle"[15] of the work by which it permits her to be a self. In short, she captures the work's capacity to evoke in her feelings and their commensurate living world.

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[15] "There is a big change after you write a poem. It's a marvelous feeling, and there's a big change in the psyche...but I think you really go into great chaos before you write a poem, and during it, and then to have to come out of that whole somehow is a *small miracle*,[italics added] which lasts for a couple of days. Then on to the next" (P. Marx, 1965, p.42).

This capacity to make her feel and live "that which is not her life" saves Anne Sexton because nearly all of her living is "not her life" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.236). Her childhood and youth she disavows--referring to the Anne who lived that history as "the other one," and dating herself by the advent of her writing rather than her natal date. She explains:

> ...on November 9th I will be 30 years old. I am crossing the margin and may no longer plead youth as my excuse. I don't mind being skinny and wrinkled but I do mind, resent really, years wasted with my own neurotic living and my dull mind. I have really only been alive for only a year (the year she has written poetry).. but my natal date is November 9, 1928 (L. Sexton, 1991, p. 40).

Just as she claims to have "been alive for only a year," so she also balks at the suggestion that she jot down her life story for she feels she has none. Asked to compose a nutshell biography for publicity purposes, Sexton finds herself in revolt. Such facts comprise only a case history or a "machine" as she calls it, suggesting that they oppress rather than express who she is (L. Sexton, 1991, p.271). From her perspective, such a biography cannot count as a viable life story. As she relates it, "...After I was married I worked as a librarian and a fashion model. Two facts. Only they are lies because I was locked in a cell. I mean, the poems hadn't come and the poems are my life" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.272). But how is it that the facts lie? The facts lie in that they are not a story, a composition created and governed by a subjectivity. They do not represent a composition, but rather a succession of sheer happenings. They occur in a time that is merely chronological. Hence they story an Anne Sexton as though she were "merely a collection of accidents, a product of a sequence of events stretching back indefinitely, a moment of natural history"(Dufrenne, 1973, p.403).

Until she begins to write, Sexton takes her self as a derivative of such time, she experiences all her living as if her "actions were no more than movements under the sway of a mechanical causality" (Taylor, 1989, p.403). Her own writing suggests as much, she represents her poetic persona as one dimensional, a being without depth. This persona moves automatically as if not informed by intention. She is but the image or surface of some anonymous body not the actual person: "I moved like a pantomime/above your head" (A. Sexton, 1960, p.36). Her very birth is mechanized: "I was stamped out like a Plymouth fender into this world." (A. Sexton, 1976, p.417). Issued forth but not made to breath. A mere "thing" produced, flat, manufactured but not living, this persona has no horizons, no orientation, she is subterranean all the time. Moreover, she cannot make anything happen in her life, her arms do not work: she is but "a stranger whose elbows wouldn't work" (A. Sexton, 1975, p.417).

Poetry as the Restitution of Self

To appreciate how it is that poetry makes Anne to live, to be a self with depth, capable of restorative self-love; to understand how she can claim that her life in poetry is her only *real* existence, I turn to Dufrenne's discussion of depth.

Dufrenne describes depth as self-presence. We acquire depth in those moments when we are capable of "joining ourselves to ourselves and of escaping time by founding a new time through fidelity to memory and to promises" (Dufrenne, 1973, p.401) Poetry constitutes just such an escape. For in poetry, Sexton can 'found a new kind of time." As Dufrenne puts it "depth arises from the use I make of the past." As I have suggested, ordinarily Sexton makes no use of the past, "the less said about the girl I was the better" (L. Sexton, 1991, p. 271). In fact, she makes scant use of the present, "Life is lovely but I can't live it" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.251). With no relation to time past or time present, she experiences herself as outside her life: "I am like a stone that lives ...locked outside of all that's real."(L. Sexton, 1991, p. 251).

In the course of writing however, Sexton can re-possess time and make for herself moments of solitude. That is, to say moments of self-love and self-presence. To explain, allow me first to define presence. What is presence as I am using it here? Perhaps most importantly presence is felt. It is rich and meaningful in so far as it is sensual. *In Pain for a Daughter*, the reader feels the mother-narrator's presence as she becomes consubstantial with that presence. The reader shares her experience. The reader is imbued with it: "you are the music while the music lasts"(T. S. Eliot, 1950, p.136). This mutuality and this sensuality is the ground from which presence emanates. Without this *touch*, presence could not move us. Presence is then, on the one hand, immediate.

At the same time, presence--at least as I am using it here to describe how Sexton finds her own self in her writing--is mediated. That is, Sexton can see herself, understand herself in so far as she can realize herself in words. In *Pain for a Daughter*, for example, Sexton's description of the mother-narrator brings her face to face with her estranged condition. She experiences her self as alien:

> ...to live but not to reach or to reach wrong.. believe me (can you?) what's wrong? I want to belong. I'm like a Jew who ends up in the wrong country. I'm not a part. I'm not a member. I'm frozen (L. Sexton, 1991, p.252).

Similarly, her description of the daughter also allows her to see herself. She, too, is a woman whose passions return her again and again to fear. Such that writing a letter back to a fan in 1974, she interjects in a nonsequitur, "but for some reason I am terribly afraid"[16] (L. Sexton, 1991, p. 398). To write *Pain for a Daughter* then is to attempt to set her *self* down in words. The presence that poetry offers is one that comes both in deciphering the meaning of the words, "the self is both made and explored in words" (Taylor, 1989, p.183) and the presence that is given in the sensual experience of reading poetry, in the sense that hovers just above the words, -- immediate, felt, untranslatable.

With this definition of presence, we can now explore how *Pain for a Daughter* allows Sexton to be present to herself, to join herself to herself. Allow for a moment, that in *Pain for a Daughter,* Sexton is able to discern her self in both the daughter and the mother. Consider then, what the writing of the poem permits. Sexton can recognize who she has been as a cohesive being: a daughter in pain, in loss, in love, in fear. Having unified her succession of (daughter) selves, Sexton can join her self to herself. That is, the daughter in fear converges and is made one and the same with the mother in fear. Amassing who she has been (a passionate girl) and amalgamating it with who she is (an estranged mother), Sexton renders for herself a subject. That is, by naming her experience and feeling it in all its immediacy, she finds herself capable of subjectivity. She makes a self who stands in accord with an internal time, wherein meaning orders events rather than chronology. This self, as Sexton depicts her, has not only weight and substance, that is to say history, but also interiority or depth.

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[16] For those I would climb a rope ladder or even crawl on stage on hands and knees and as I said in my column, "read my God-damned heart out." Of course you don't come as executioners but for some reason I am terribly afraid, and I could go on about that in detail, but for those few who did come to hear my living voice I say, "God is holding me."

Conclusion

As exhibited in the poem the mother-narrator's self-presence is a "seeing" that changes time. Seeing of this order constitutes the very act of being "with". Through seeing the mother is with her daughter--in the present as she lives life's progression blind with love, loss, pain, fear--with the daughter in the moment of her self-exiling terror her "breath sucked in and arched against the pain, her eyes glancing off me where I stand at the door" and in the future with all the selves the daughter will be in childbirth and in death "and I saw her, at that moment, in her own death." Seeing then serves as a form of faithfulness to whom I have been and who I will be. Such a faith changes time whereby "I do not move through time, but time moves in upon me where I live" (Momaday, N.S., 1976).

Coextensive, then, with the meaning of words and all that is transgressive in love stands the music of the words and all that is possible in love. Lingering just above the daunting realization that the love she craves ravages is the echo of the line "and I knew that she knew." The beauty of the poetic, here, is that the same words that make explicit and inescapable a problematic understanding of love (that love is pain) are the words whose resonance, sensuality and music make manifest a protective and constitutive mother-love which is also Anne Sexton's self-presence.

In this context, Sexton's claim that poetry saves her becomes comprehensible. As poet she is capable of casting a world in which her perverse intimacies may exist side by side her devout ones. Mother-love can entail merging with the daughter, inhabiting the same word-space-body as the daughter ("and I knew that she knew") because the daughter is not only a daughter but also a self. Within the dreamlike truth of the poem, time and space do not exist, or they exist in another form such that there are no incongruities. Love can stand overdetermined, at once narcissistic and profound, selfish and compassionate, destructive and constitutive, damning and saving.. Within the realm of the poem, she can exist with all her irreconcilable differences. Within the poem's text, she can be as her favorite palindrome implies, both the rat and the star. To ask, as she does that this palindrome be inscribed on her tombstone, is to ask to be remembered for herself in her entirety: "Rats live on no evil stars."

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Anne Sexton: A Psychological Portrait

PAPER II

Death and the Writer

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compelling--even as she understood that one "does not look backward for an answer in an old poem?" (L. G. Sexton, & Ames, 1977, p.421). And what finally can these poems show us as we attempt to garner some understanding of Anne Sexton, her writing and her death?

Both poems, *The Truth the Dead Know* (1962) and *The Touch* (1969) valorize touch (see Appendixes F and G for complete poems). Both express the faith that touch can redeem, save, vivify, but they do so to different ends. Where *The Truth the Dead Know* uses writing to instantiate the body--to make the body to live, *The Touch* uses it to obviate the body--to make the body to die. In *The Truth the Dead Know* Sexton makes manifest a poetic power that renders her deeply and bodily present. So profound is her presence that she can touch even the dead. Conversely, in *The Touch*, she uses writing as a means of escaping embodiment. Sexton herself confesses as much to Dr. Martin Orne in 1956. Describing how she neglects her family, Sexton links writing with drinking and drugs: "Only time I am there is when I am thinking about poetry or writing--shuffling between methods of escape--liquor, pills, writing -- I don't have anything else"(Middlebrook, 1991, p.61). She seeks relief from the burden of being in a touch that offers all and nothing, contact and oblivion. To understand the Anne Sexton that these poems make manifest is to understand how writing served both to save and to kill her.

The Touch of Poetry

Dedicated to her mother and father who died within three months of each other *The Truth the Dead Know* (1962) has been described as an "anti-elegy." The poem presents a narrator who refuses to mourn and who repudiates her loss by vanquishing the dead:

> Gone I say and walk from church,
> refusing the stiff procession to the grave
> letting the dead ride alone in the hearse
> It is June. I am tired of being brave.

Determined to set herself apart from grief, the persona in the poem attempts to pre-empt the dead by abandoning them first, leaving them to "ride alone in the hearse." Setting off to the Cape with her lover, she is intent on living life not death, on "cultivating (her) self/ where the sun gutters from the sky."

And yet death is ever present infused in her consciousness such that all her living acts are edged with it. It is not only in the funeral procession she leaves behind, but also in the dead she cannot help but see as she stares out over the ocean:

> ...They (the dead) lie without shoes
> in their stone boats. They are more like stone
> than the sea would be if it stopped.

Death is in the thoughts that pass over her as she touches her lover:

> ...the sea swings in like an iron gate
> and we touch. In another country people die.

So near and all encompassing is death it is in the air itself. It is the stone-cold chill of the wind as it sweeps the sunbather's bodies:

> My darling, the wind falls in like
> stones from the whitehearted water
> and when we touch, we touch entirely
> no one's alone.

Stones in their closed impenetrability are Sexton's equivalent of death: the dead inhabit "stone" boats and are more like "stone" than the becalmed sea.

Situated in this place of ever-present death, the persona enters touch. It is in her consciousness of death that she is moved to act. And though the persona has fled death, though she has attempted to banish the dead, her attempt doubles back on her. The very step she has taken to deny the dead, returns the dead to her tenfold.

Her drive to the sea makes clear that she cannot shed her consciousness of the dead merely by turning from them. She cannot make herself through her living acts. She cannot excise the dead from her being by placing them at a geographic distance or even by countering their mortality with the living embrace of her lover. Ineluctably tied to the dead, her attempts to deny their hold on her only serve to reveal her boundedness. Immersed in her lover's embrace, far from the funeral scene, she still finds she can see nothing but the dead. So deeply is she connected to the dead that neither distance, nor passion can dim her awareness of them. And so she finds herself addressing the dead, albeit defiantly. She asks: "What of the dead?" What of the dead who abandon me, who confront me with my own mortality. Next to the "all" of my lover's touch what do they count for?

Answering her own question, she undermines this attempt at cavalier disregard. Her words betray an irreducible tenderness for the dead. Blessing them, holding them near, making them beautiful in her lyricism, her words touch even the recalcitrant dead:

> And what of the dead? They lie without shoes
> in their stone boats. They are more like stone
> than the sea would be if it stopped. They refuse
> to be blessed, throat, eye, and knucklebone.

Imaging the dead as "more like stone than the sea would be if it stopped," the persona overrides reality--such that we can see the stoniness of the dead only through the sea. And to see the sea rightly, we must look on it "as if it had stopped." Even stopped, however, the sea is "not so much like stone as the dead." So we must look again (at the sea) and see the sea as a potentiality--ever alive even under its glassy stillness. And when we have finished with this labor, we can never again see the dead as merely stone. Stone has become embedded with the sea.

Both like the stone and like the sea, the dead are made to die and to live in this poem. In fact as the poem closes the dead's very physicality becomes ambiguous. Though "they refuse to be blessed (to hear)/ throat (to speak), eye (to see), knucklebone (to touch)," the persona touches them. Setting down her words across their inert bodies, the persona brings the dead into form, foregrounding their bodiliness with language even as death promises their physical dissolution (their deadness.) The dead, in kind, respond. That is, they talk back, they "refuse to be blessed." And so the poem ends in dialog: the persona touching, blessing; the dead refusing.

Remembering the dead in the very poem written to vanquish them, bringing them near even as it claims to put them far, holding them, cherishing them even as the narrator attempts indifference, *The Truth the Dead Know* cannot help but envelop the dead. In achieving this embrace, the poem momentarily shows Sexton to be a body capable of "that spiritual maturation that makes invention possible" (Dufrenne,1973, p.32). That is, within the world of the poem she inhabits an experiential body capable of feeling all contraries confounded. Where the sheer incompatibility of her emotions might render her senseless in prose, mad in life, this same quality is the driving force that allows her poetry it's plurality of meanings. In *The Truth the Dead Know* the very persona who commits an act of reciprocal psychological violence, turning from the dead as they have turned from her, is the persona who blesses the dead, who touches them and so spares them the scandal of loneliness and separation.

To be capable of such an art, is to have momentarily become a body "capable of spiritual maturation that makes invention possible" (Dufrenne,1973, p.32). Alive, immediate, a source of plenitude, the body bequeathed to Anne Sexton as author is a poetic text whose fullness of meaning continuously transcends her expectations. Such a body can deepen rage, cynicism, flippancy ("Gone I say and walk from church refusing the stiff procession to the grave") until these sentiments show themselves in their more naked form as spiritual emptiness. Such a body can make even the dead to live. To speak, to name the world is to make it real (not naturally but historically). And so the poet invents. She names the dead: "they are more like stone than the sea would be if it stopped." She summons them. That is, she brings to "full sensuous presence" the stone-like impenetrability of the dead as it is situated amidst the more familiar reality of their past aliveness, their sea-likeness. She makes them to be in their new condition. She invents the dead as presence made palpable by absence.

In so doing, she momentarily shows her body to be capable of the particular sentience that makes poetry possible. For such a body nothing is beyond redemption. All things can be felt, known, suffered because they are contextualized always by that which makes meaning. That is, they are integrated into the body's interiority such that pain is always haloed by tenderness, loss by presence, fear by faith, sin by grace.

Conversely, in life Sexton exists without such a body. She speaks of herself as lacking the sentience, inwardness, depth and orientation that embodiment implies. In life, her body is but a thing: "To pray," Sexton writes in her poem *Jesus Walking* (1974) (see Appendix T for complete poem), "...is to be a man carrying a man." (A. Sexton, 1981, p.383). That is, to pray, is to drag the dead weight of her own living body yet another step. The sheer effort it takes to bear her self from one day to the next is Sexton's equivalent of faith. How meager this is. How little it provides in the way of spiritual sustenance; hence Anne's constant references to hunger ("...and my hunger for love is as immense as your eating people in *Wonderland*" (L. Sexton, 1977, p.396). The point is, however, that in life, the body is somehow an other that Sexton must bear. It is alien, immobile. It impedes. If she is to experience anything, if she is to pray even, she must lift it up and carry forward a body that would otherwise hold her in stasis.

"We feel inert before inert things," Dufrenne (1973, p.278) asserts. And Anne Sexton is inert before her life. As she cannot herself move, it does not move her. Hung, fixed, think like, the world as Anne Sexton visions it is a two-dimensional place without depth, time or flux. Her lack of inner depth is projected directly onto whatever she sees. To her experiential body then the outdoors looks like a calendar: "Soon the yellow leaves will come to New England," Anne writes to lover Phil Legler on September 6, 1967, "ah ache and nostalgia and grief. And why? Grief comes because the outdoors looks like a calendar" (L. Sexton, 1991 p.320). To belong , to make herself a part of such a realm is to wish herself capable of resignation. Were she to give up all hope of restoring her depths, she would not grieve, she would simply exist, uncomplaining. Expressing this ambivalence, she writes to Robert Lowell on June 6, 1963: "One of these days, I will learn to bear myself and to be as lifelike as a snapshot" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.

170). To engage in the life she happens to inhabit, the house where she is a mother, the home where she is a wife, the suburb where she is a neighbor is to accept being one who has no body--who exists only as flat, stultifying image.

In contrast, when she composes poetry, she finds herself released, vital, capable of movement, feeling, touch. And it is while inhabiting such a body, which is but a poetic text, that she is capable of touch. She defines herself then by this possibility in a letter to De Snodgrass, January 11, 1959: "I'm the crazy one who thinks words reach people" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.48). Professing this belief, naming herself by this possibility, she speaks of language as a physical encounter. It can touch, "Language led me by the hand out of madness" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.335); it can bleed: "write some more 'real'...write me some blood" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.109); it can quench thirst, "I am very fond of that book and read it often when I am thirsty or lonely" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.138); it can bruise, "I rather like being slugged; to walk away from the poem with an old wound reopened....to let the poem bruise me" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.69). And in so far as this contact heightens reality, deepens existence, it provides the only contact Anne Sexton can stand. It is also what she has got to have to live: a body--a feeling sentient, expressive body. So it is both hyperbole and truth when she writes to Hollis Summers on March 16, 1960, "Right now I would rather read it (*Henderson the Rain King*) than breath" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.102). Or when she writes, in a moment of anguish to Brother Dennis Farell June 21, 1962: "I'm in trouble NOW. Write me anything.. just words" (L. Sexton, 1991, p. 141). Or when she remarks to De

Snodgrass, April, 1959, "I'm glad you wrote, I thought I had died or something"(L. Sexton, 1991, p. 71).

The urgent bodily need for writing is evident most strikingly in one of the formative moments of Anne's poetic career. Sometime in mid-March of 1958, Sexton encounters a poem by De Snodgrass while skimming an anthology entitled *New Poets of England and America*. Addressed to Snodgrass' three-year-old daughter, the poem, "Heart's Needle," tells how a divorced father endures a legal separation from his daughter by recognizing their perpetual bond. Sexton whose own severe spells of depression has required her to place her youngest daughter, Joy, in her mother-in-law's care is struck by the poem. By her own report, upon reading it she rushes up the hill to retrieve her daughter. Writing to Snodgrass, on March 11, 1959, to describe this experience, Sexton explains "when I read your poem that first time, leafing through the anthology, it walked out at me and grew like a bone in my heart" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.66). Bolstered by antidepressants, Sexton brings Joy home to stay by the summer of 1958.

Without poetry, Anne foregoes the maternity of her body. That is, in her lived experience she denies the body its chance to bond to its own blood, to care for its own issue. While visiting Joy at her mother-in-law's for example, she refuses to dress her daughter for bed. Explaining her conduct to her doctor Sexton offers: "I used to pretend that Joy wasn't mine" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.35). In giving up entirely that which her body has born--because as she expresses it, "I am not feminine enough to be all lost in their care" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.63). Sexton negates her physical being: it has no consequences, no ramifications, no meanings. She is a woman but not feminine, she is a mother but not maternal, "12-fingered out of mind," she is "not a woman quite" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.15). In denying herself her body's experience, she cuts herself off from that which sustains. For it is through the body that we know abundance. As Dufrenne (1973) explains:

> ...here (in my body, my body which is permeated with soul), I know things in the same way that they know me, that is, without explicitly recognizing them. Conscious perception will thereby gain the impression of plenitude. p.338

Anne Sexton's sense of deprivation derives, I would contend, from her disembodied condition. Sporting lines like, "I bite myself and stick myself in a drink to revive"[17] (L. Sexton, 1991, p.320), Sexton's letters reflect her rabid desire to achieve a body and vital existence. This metaphoric gesture of self-destruction can be read as a sign of her need. Less shocking but still in the same vein, Sexton's letter to Joyce Carol Oates, June 4, 1973 follow the same theme. Late in her life she writes Oates saying, "I wish I could borrow some of your surface, your ease, your composure" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.397). To be capable of composure is to be capable of holding one's form, of containing, of embodying. Sexton's lived experience is such that her body is but an intermittent possibility that poetry helps realize. Thus, it is poetry, that having permitted her a body, makes her able to contain:

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[17] Letter to Phil Legler, September 6, 1967

> In becoming aware of myself (in poems) I do not yet know what I am; but I do know that I am something to which the feeling belongs, not something belonging to it (Middlebrook, 1991, p.209).

The experiential body, then, is for Anne Sexton something both essential and elusive; something she can attain only in the province of her poetic work. As author she can compose a text that instantiates in her depth and interiority as well as the capacity to feel and to touch. As author she can make for herself a form/body whose meanings continuously transcend her expectations. But this body is hard-won. Indeed, in her early work, she appropriates such a body. Explaining her strict adherence to given poetic forms, Sexton tells interviewer with Patricia Marx: "If you used form, it was like letting a lot of wild animals out in the arena, but enclosing them in a cage, and you could let some extraordinary animals out if you had the right cage, and that cage would be form"(P. Marx, 1965, p.39-40). Without her poetry and its attendant form/body, however, Anne Sexton exists in an estranged state. Stilted, flat, one-dimensional, the Anne Sexton who inhabits the day-to-day world of Weston, Massachusetts is disembodied, incapable of feeling or of connection.

The Touch of Death

If in its inauguration, poetry gifted Anne Sexton with a sentient, experiential body, how does it happen that two decades later this same poetry can no longer serve? How does poetry come to fail Anne Sexton or she it? To begin grappling with this issue, I would like to examine the second poem Sexton commends to

Steve Axelrod's attention, *The Touch* (1969). Though Sexton writes *The Touch* in the prime of her writing career,[18] it reveals her in her demise rather than her ascent as a poet. For she confronts in this poem a problem that will eventually defeat her as an artist. That is, she attempts to instantiate in poetry the utter absence of a body.

To address this problem Sexton must work against her predominant artistic practice and beliefs. Traditionally Sexton avowed poetry's capacity to embody her. She defined herself by this belief: "I'm the crazy one who thinks that words *reach* (my italics) people" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.48). Her artistic goals were rooted in this faith. Describing her purpose as an artist, for example, Sexton explained to interviewer Barbara Kelves, "I want the reader to feel, ... 'Yes, yes, that's the way it is,' I want them to feel as if they were touching me" (Kelves, 1978, p.22). At least a part of writing's "magic," as Sexton called it, was that it restored to her the body's attendant hold on the world, "..if I can write a poem, ... the world is again a little more sensible and real" (Lacey, 1988, p.234). Given this history and this vision, how then can Sexton use this same medium, poetry, to convey the isolation, the lostness, the sheer dread of living that she feels while disembodied? She cannot. She cannot give form to the suffering that precedes her suicide. She cannot realize a poetic body, run through with blood, spirit, sensuous knowing, to express a terror that has no form. She cannot use a language that ties her in comfort, "let your body in,/ let it tie you in /in comfort," (see Appendix H for complete poem) to express a dread that is beyond all comfort. Nonetheless, she tries, and in so doing, she destroys first her art and then her self (A. Sexton, 1981, p.145).

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[18] She composes *The Touch* in 1966 and wins the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1967.

For as she nears the end of her life, she comes to inscribe the dread that pervades her living over the body that is her poetry. Her late texts are reduced. They become like her: chaotic, corrupt, riddled with the self-loathing and escapism. They fail as art. Sexton admits as much sending some of her late poems to Erica Jong on July 31, 1974 she writes: "Your Whitman poem is really fine and makes me feel guilty for the assorted poems I send because gloom is cheap, yet one writes what one must" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.419). Unlike the poetry that could endowed her with a sentient experiential body, these texts serve simply to chronicle her suffering.

In *The Touch* we find an early exemplar of just such a chronicle. In this work, Sexton tries and fails to make her disembodied condition amenable to her art. The early stanzas of *The Touch* feature a narrator's study of her own hand. Characterizing this hand as "an unconscious woman fed by tubes she knew not of," the persona attempts to define the nature of her suffering. She is insensate. She belongs to an immobile body. Yet, this description does not do justice to her condition. She is not simply a body benumbed. For there remains some semblance of consciousness, some trace of bodiliness, like the phantom pain of an amputated limb, that makes her capable of dread. She dreads existing as she is: "not alive but not quite dead." And yet the poem cannot bring forth the presence of this dread. Her metaphors will not build, deepening the scope of her conception, allowing her to write “more than I knew I knew” (L.Sexton, 1991, p.142). She is but amassing stray images to no clear purpose. She cannot concatenate a vision. After likening the hand to “subway railings,” to something “bruised” and “imprisoned,” to a “clock that you could tell time by,” and to “an unconscious woman fed by tubes she knew not of,” Sexton dismisses metaphor. She opens the third stanza prosaically saying: “And all this is metaphor/ An ordinary hand--just lonely/ for something to touch/ that touches back.” Like her images, however, her prose operates as mere object. She is left with a language that reports, that delivers information, but does not offer up a sensual body, animate with meaning. Failing this endeavor, she tries yet another line of development. She creates a text that valorizes the death and sexualizes suicide. Though capable of a seductive magnetism, (death is better than nothingness), this effort likewise fails as art. For the impulse to animate the body by annihilating it cannot finally serve to produce the transcendence of art. Setting forth a pattern that will emerge again in her late work, the early stanzas of *The Touch* show both an effort to write, a repudiation of that effort, and an attempt to escape into the sexual.

The Effort to Write

To better understand how the problem in *The Touch* eventually defeats Sexton as an artist, we must follow her into her late work. In this work, as in *The Touch,* Sexton expresses her disembodied experience in poetry only to find that it will not lend itself to such treatment. Pervaded by dread, Sexton cannot give life to a poem and render for herself its concomitant embodiment. Rather her efforts to write produce a text that is but a reflection of her perverse living.

Confession, once the source of her best art, appears in her late life to put her at risk. To write is to make manifest her radical discontinuity with the body. Her late texts heighten her terror, exposing the nature of her suffering without ameliorating it. In *Talking Sheep* (1976) (for complete poem see Appendix I), for example, voices are displaced into foreign forms. The mother's voice becomes like water; the father's is "thrown into a cigar," the great aunt's is "thrown into a lost child at the freak's circus" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.486). To speak is to risk making evident her dislocation and disorientation. For the voice no longer inheres. To write of this condition in her poetry, however, in no way alters it. For even as she writes, Sexton is throwing her voice into 'a costume of her own making' as she gives readings (L. Sexton, 1991, p.396). Writing fellow author Joyce Carol Oates on June 4, 1973, Sexton explains "I am popularly known as the crazy poet,...And after all, it is my fault. I did write about it so thoroughly, explored it so I made my own costume, so to speak, and at each reading I must step into it, although it no longer fits" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.396). When she reads from her work, she dissociates. Thrown into a poem where she no longer inheres, her voice performs lines which summon a sense of a body -- but it is not Sexton's body. She does not recognize herself in it. For these lines no longer tell of her as she is. And so to read her poetry is to assume a body that is not, by feeling, her own.

Her March seventh 1974 reading in Harvard's Saunder's Theater demonstrates this point. Having spent the morning in a fugue state slumped on the floor of her therapist's office and having drunk heavily as was her pre-reading practice, she begins her reading, slurry and unintelligible: "Only once in my life have I dedicated a reading..." (L. Sexton, 1994, p.159). Yet just when she looks as if she will dissolve into incoherence, she regains herself. She stands up, her voice grows deep and steady, and she carries forth. So posed, Sexton proceeds to give an electrifying reading in which she banters with the audience and eventually bows to a standing ovation (adapted from D. Middlebrook's description, 1991, p.395). To watch her read is quite literally to see her voice re-locate itself. Pulled out of the dead, dissipated forty-five year old Sexton, the voice is thrown into a performing body where it expresses "a practiced emotion, one I've felt before"[19] (Middlebrook, 1991, p.391). Sexton's own jokes intimate as much. Reading from, *The Death Notebooks*, newly published and *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, still in manuscript, she jokes that she is reading from her posthumously published works. In many ways, she is. Her own body is all but dead. Her performing body is not rightly hers. In March of 1974, barely more than six months before her death, her ghost of a body has been animated, posthumously it would seem, by the sheer charisma of her poetry.

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[19] Citing tapes of the therapy session betwcen Anne Sexton and Dr. Martin Orne, Middlebrook explains: "Back in 1969 she (Anne Sexton) commented to Dr. Orne about this facility for switching into a performance mode: "I could perform just before I die, I think, but it's a performance of the poems. I know the lines--it's a practiced emotion, one I've felt before--"(Middlebrook, 1991, p.391)

Elaborating another version of this theme, Sexton's work shows how her being is vulnerable to appropriation by foreign voices. Without a body, without something to enclose her, Sexton is readily taken over by the opportunist. In *Passion of the Mad Rabbit* (1976) (see Appendix J for complete poem) an intruder walks right into the narrator's body and begins speaking in her place:

> I underwent a removal, a tearing of the skin off me
> ...and as these phenomenon occurred, a fool walked straight into me.
> He was named Mr. Rabbit. My own voice spoke to people,
> anyone, friends, strangers on the street saying
> "I am Mr. Rabbit." p. 484

Again in this passage we can see how writing documents but does not mitigate Sexton's bodiless condition. She is her own impostor. Looking for companionship in drunken late night telephone calls or brief liaisons with fans and hired help:[20] her "own voice" speaks as she reports it in the poem "to people anyone, friends, strangers on the street." In engagements of this kind, all contact becomes equally meaningless. Her voice has been appropriated by the impostor and so does not discriminate between strangers and friends. Both are merely anyone and no one to her. As impostor, she feels no need to anchor what she says in what she lives. Her most critical relationships are marked by deception. Misrepresenting her finances to her last psychiatrist, Dr. Chase, as well as others, she holds that she alone faces "the terrible financial responsibility" of "two rather adult daughters" whose schooling "necessitates more readings than I would care to give and may necessitate me going from a part time professor at Boston University to a full time" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.401). In fact, Sexton's husband, Kayo is paying both Linda's and Joy's tuition in full. By accidentally revealing this fact to Chase, Sexton brings about a confrontation that ruins their relationship.

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[20] Finding herself without suitors in her intimate life, she turns to her hired nurse whom her daughter, Linda, surmises shares her drinking bouts as well as her marital bed. (L. Sexton, 1994, p.173).

Her own past becomes a part of this disavowal. Her life as a poet is subject to doubt. Without a body she can bear no history nor can she have continuity with any future. She has spent her life asserting that if she existed, she existed in her poetry. Writing to her daughter Linda she urges: "Talk to my poems, talk to your heart--I'm in both: if you need me,"(L. Sexton, 1991, p. 424) or to Brother Dennis Farrell: "I am awfully glad you found some "truth" in my letters and that, somehow or other, I managed to reveal that I am I.. that I of the poems.." (L. Sexton, 1991, p.137). As she nears death, however, she rescinds this claim. Writing to Erica Jong in June of 1974 after meeting her in New York City during a reading, Sexton says, "I only want to say ...that isn't the real me, the woman of the poems, the woman of the kitchen , the woman of the private (but published) hungers" (L.Sexton, 1991, p. 413).

This disavowal is thorough. To declare she is "not the woman of the kitchen" is to claim that she is not that "true self" her poems once found her to be. To make such an assertion is to take from her self, her single most meaningful achievement: the making of a self that was at once private and universal, particular and true. For the phrase the "woman of the kitchen," is one Sexton originates in a poem and later appropriates to her letters, signing them, "from my kitchen to your kitchen" as an expression of intimacy and affection. Initially part of the poem, *For John Who Begs Me Not To Inquire Further* (1960) (see Appendix K for complete poem), this phrase captures the whole raison d'être of Sexton's poetry. In *For John Who Begs Me Not To Inquire Further,* the emerging artist defends her practice of writing about her suicide and despair in "the commonplaces of the asylum." She asserts, "At first it (her despair) was private./Then it was more than myself;/ it was you, or your house, or your kitchen." The phrase, "your kitchen," refers both to the dread that I have in my kitchen, my private mundane life, and the dread you, dear reader, have in yours. Hence the "it" becomes "more than myself."

In rescinding this identity ("I am not the woman of the kitchen"), in suggesting that even this hard won self is but borrowed, a fiction, a lie, Anne Sexton reveals the depth of her disaffection. Nothing, not even her poetry, is to be spared denigration. And such complete abjection cannot give itself over to art, cannot open itself to grace. Thus she appears in her late writing as she is, a front, a voiceless body, a body without voice, a woman without a clear interior or exterior, without a past or a future, a no body.

Both *Passion of the Mad Rabbit* (1976) and *The Talking Sheep,* (1976) are given over to depicting this state. Both texts show how the voice which is intimate and internal to our bodily being is subject to violation, invasion, "Mr. Rabbit walked right into me.."(*Passion of the Mad Rabbit*), and exile, "my mother's voice was thrown into a cigar" (*The Talking Sheep*). No longer issuing from the speaker's body, a given voice and the language it speaks are only coincidentally affiliated with one body and then another. Such a language has no fidelity to any one's lived experience. Such a language is not expressive and cannot be used then to fashion an identity.

And this bleak state is the very one within which Sexton passes her last days. She has no confidence that what she says will adhere to who she is. Even as she declares to Axelrod, for example, that *The Truth* and the last two stanzas of *The Touch* have the most meaning for her "to this day," she simultaneously undercuts this declaration, countering, "although that is just a passing thought and I could change my mind in five minutes" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.382). In short, she makes clear how there is nothing that holds her to her words. No identity stays her, gives her weight, allows her to last. She is completely subject to an indifferent and external time. She has no interiority with which to live the meaningful; "I am the misplacer of the meaningful"(L. Sexton, 1991, p.142). The passage of but a few minutes could erase, alter, obviate even that which mattered most.

Having forfeited allegiance to a given body, Sexton's late texts go on to show how such language has nothing in particular to say. In *Talking Sheep*, for example, the persona explains that she must learn to say "ba" to the black sheep I am:"

> It was wise, the wise men said
>
> wise to cry Baa and be smiling into your mongoloidhood,

> ...Or else to sew your lips shut
>
> and not let a word or a deadstone sneak out.

Imaged as mere senseless sound, stripped of expression, and subject to muting, the language she is advised to assume is severely diminished. To use it, is to put herself at yet greater risk than she was when she spoke in a dislocated voice. The "ba, ba" in *Talking Sheep* or the "shriek of my heart like a phone off the hook," in *Passion of the Mad Rabbit* are tiring and monotonous. Restricted to monosyllabic sounds, Sexton cannot elaborate, digress, qualify or refine meaning. She cannot begin to write and find herself surprised by a thought or an image that arises spontaneously out of language itself. If she attempts to communicate with another using such a language, she does not find herself in communion with them because of the open quality of her expression. In fact, the opposite, the more openly and insistently she sounds her monosyllable, the more tiring she becomes. Nothing new comes of her attempt to write, nothing is exposed or revealed. The prudent move then is to keep such words to yourself, "One learns not to blab about all this except to yourself or the typewriter keys" (A. Sexton, 1981, p. 548). But even this will not work. First such a move proves severely isolating. Second, and perhaps more significant, the ruined language that Sexton is working with and living in estranges her from herself as readily as it alienates her from others.

Even as her own sole audience, Sexton feels put off, rather than being drawn in by this language. Referring to her effort to write, she reports: "I'm getting bored with it" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.548). What is tedious here, however, can quickly become deadly. If as in *The Passion of the Mad Rabbit*, the persona's voice is but a grating repetitive sound, "the shriek of my heart like the phone off the hook," then this language can quickly become difficult to bear. Offering nothing, but a kind of perpetual demand, such language strains patience to the point of inviting destruction, "squashing." To be bored, put off, disaffected by the very voice that comes out of one's mouth, to turn against that which inhabits one is to make ready for self-destruction.

We are beginning to develop an understanding of how it is that Sexton would be led to use writing to obviate the body. Language as an expressive possibility has failed her. Her dread is not amenable to expression in poetry. But Anne cannot accept this experience as final. Hence she begins to write frantically, compulsively as she herself says, "like a wolf at a live heart" (for complete poem see Appendix L) (A. Sexton, 1981, p.466). In her desperation, she comes to eviscerate language itself. She treats it as she treats her own living corporeal body. Just as she dismisses her body's needs and wishes--forgetting to eat (at 5'8" she weighs 110 lbs in her last year), drinking heavily (even slipping liquor into her coffee during morning faculty meetings at Boston University), foregoing contact with others (she banishes her friends calling them a "witches' coven," (Middlebrook, 1991, p.392) when they attempt to provide her with a 24-hour suicide watch) so too she dismisses her writing's need for revision "I hope it is well written but that seems extraneous" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.392). Where once she took care to prepare her poems, typing them carefully, in an uncharacteristically neat fashion, on erasable bond paper, dating them, arranging them in book like sequences in their folders (Middlebrook, 1991, p.45) late in her life, she works maniacally with no time for the niceties of form. As she was reckless and ruinous with her own living body, so, too, she is with her text-body. Language whose beauty was that it once came out of her as it came upon her---like grace, now merely comes out of her.

In the face of such a demise, Sexton formulates a different tact. She will attempt to use language to sexualize her self destruction. Perhaps by taking this approach, she can once again manage the fragile process of assembling meaning. If she is, as she expresses it, "mouth at the wall," (L. Sexton, 1991, p.229) if no constancy governs her last months and days, if stripped of a body, no lived experience informs her present, then might she not take recourse in writing a death-bound erotica? Such writing might serve both to summon and consume the body. For what she seeks is not just any death. What she seeks is a particular death in which she might "split/from my life with no flag,/ no belly,/ no cry" (A.Sexton, 1981, p.54). The text she strives for is one that might both satisfy and eliminate desire, bestow and dispense with the body in one movement so that she could die with "no cry."

Anticipating her late work, the closing stanzas of *The Touch* show just this line of development. In the last two stanzas of *The Touch* that she commends to Axelrod's attention, Sexton equates the bodily capacity to touch with death.

Then all this became history

Your hand found mind

Life rushed to my fingers like a blood clot.

Imaged as a seizure of energy, the touch depicted in this poem, resembles an orgasmic contraction that bears within itself, its own extinction.

Late in her life exhausted by the work of bearing her hideous, drunken (she is an advanced alcoholic), lecherous body (she is soliciting sex from old lovers, fans and hired help) from day to day, Sexton revisits this theme both in her writing and her conduct. To escape the body, she rehearses a suicide that entails submerging herself in sexual rapture. Her writing serves to bolster and reify this escape rather than avert it. For example, shortly after she exchanges sharp words with life-long friend and colleague Maxine Kumin, she goes home and puts on one of her most provocative red reading dresses. She then takes a cab to the bank of the Charles River directly opposite her daughter Linda's Harvard dormitory. She dances along the embankment, trailing in and out of the water while washing down handfuls of pills with a thermos of milk. A passerby eventually stops her and takes her to Mount Auburn Hospital Emergency Room (description adapted from L. Sexton, 1994, p. 16). Subsequently recounting this escapade in her work, she writes a poem entitled *The Red Dance* (1976) (see Appendix M for complete poem):

...Cars and trucks went by
on Memorial Drive.
And the Harvard students in the brick

hallowed houses studied Sappho in cement rooms.
And this Sappho danced on the grass
and danced and danced and danced
It was a death dance.
(...)
and this strange Sappho knew she would enter the lights
and be lit by them and sink into them
And how the end would come--
it had been foretold to her--
she would aspirate swallowing a fish
going down with God's first creature
dancing all the way.

Aligning herself with Sappho, Sexton indulges in a grandiose account of her conduct. Sappho, a lyric Greek poet and a lesbian threw herself into the sea after having been spurned in love. Sexton while not spurned by a lover, has been spurned by a friend or so she sees it. After their joint reading, Sexton mistook Kumin to say that her flamboyant performances were but prostitutions (L. Sexton, 1994, p.163). Her poem *The Red Dance* and her dance along the Charles incorporate this accusation. In both she assumes a prostitute's stance, dressed in red, dancing on the water's edge while taking "kill-me pills,"(Middlebrook, 1991, p.34), soliciting attention, pity, sex, death. In her poem, she glorifies her suicide attempt, equating her life with Sappho's: implying that she has been scorned by a great love rather than scolded by an exasperated friend, implying that her suicide would be strange, luminous ("she would enter the lights and be lit by them"), fated ("it had been foretold"), primordial ("with God's first creature"), when it is but a pathetic, deluded plea for attention. She has perverted her writing. She who once gave herself to her poetry allowing it to embody her and show her "more than she knew, she knew," now makes the poetry to serve her. In writing it, she treats her work as but another one of her whores. Rather than making visible a deeper truth, her texts now attempt to sexualize and thereby obfuscate her loneliness, and her absolute absence of a body.

Like the hand in *The Touch*, that dances, "in the attic," and "in Vienna" this body that *The Red Dance* makes manifest is operating on the level of the merely sensuous and as such it can be exhausted. It is not sustainable and yet Sexton reifies it, claiming just the opposite. For while the dance lasts, it offers the "all" which Sexton seeks in poetry. While it lasts this sexualized text is the closest thing to plenitude that Sexton can attain. While it lasts, this arousal offers Sexton some vestige of a body.

Offering a damning critique of Sexton's late writing, Joyce Carol Oates describes Sexton's late work as "a deliberate betrayal" of her earlier work (Oates, 1989, p.60). Asserting that Anne Sexton makes no attempt at "translating emotion into a coherent poetic image," Oates ascribes to Sexton a "lust to destroy poetry itself" (Oates, 1989, p.60). While acknowledging the presence of such a lust, I would suggest--just contrary to what Oates claims--that it is precisely Sexton's relentless attempts to "translate emotion into a coherent poetic image," that lead her to destroy poetry.

Attempting both to express and resist her disembodied condition Sexton writes. Linda Sexton reports:

> Anne turned increasingly to her work--often writing all day long and forgetting to eat. ...Between June of 1972 and October 1974, she had written three new books: *The Death Notebooks*, *The Awful Rowing Toward God* and *45 Mercy Street* (L. Sexton, 1991, p.390).

The sheer proliferation of her late work testifies to the frenzied panic with which she searches line after line to find a language that can name and thereby ground her suffering in poetry, her pain in a body. And yet no words prove adequate.[1] And where this failing irritated Sexton in *The Touch* and led her to dismiss metaphor, it enrages her in her late work, leading her to damn language altogether. Expressing her rage in her posthumously published volume, *45 Mercy Street*, Sexton contends that her poetry is worth no more than "a cut penny and the entrails of a cat" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.484). Barren of that intimate experiential body it once bore, language fails her. More than this, language betrays her. Though she turns to it frantically to find a way to live, her late texts refuse her, insisting over and over again that her suffering is "unbearable because it belongs to no one"--to no body (Alvarez, 1971, p.269).[21]

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[21] "And perhaps what finally makes a man kill himself is not the firmness of his resolve but the unbearable quality of this anguish which belongs to no one, of this suffering in the absence of a sufferer..," (Alvarez, 1971, p.269).

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Anne Sexton: A Psychological Portrait

PAPER III

Revision and the Writer

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Revision and the Writer

In my first paper, "Love and the Writer," and my second paper "Death and the Writer," I discussed how poetry saves Anne Sexton by endowing her respectively with a presence and an experiential, sentient body. In both papers I show how as she ages, her writing deteriorates and is no longer able to work as "dear magic" (see Appendix S, p.202). In "Love and the Writer" the aging poet resorts to defending her narcissism rather than expressing her love. In "Death and the Writer," she struggles doggedly to give expression to her disembodied condition only to find that this condition is not amenable to such treatment. Her writing disintegrates. Without its poetics, her text fails to embody her. Rather it serves merely to make blatant and terrifying the fact that her suffering belongs to no body. In the last of my three papers, as in the proceeding two, I will look at Anne Sexton through her writing. Again I will ask: how does it happen that poetry first protects and then fails to protect its author from suicide? I will explore the possibility that it is not the initial casting of the poem, but rather the (a particular kind of) tenacious revision that allows Sexton to speak of poetry as saving her. As early as January of 1973 (Sexton's suicide occurs October 4, 1974) Sexton's capacity for revision was beginning to wane. Dismissing revision as a nicety, Sexton herself says of her newest manuscript, *The Death Notebooks*:

> ...I hope they (her poems) are well written but that seems extraneous... I ought to be able to know how to write by now, I ought to know how to live by now. That is, I ought to be able to dig a trench in my soul and find

> something there. (L. Sexton, 1991, p.392, Letter to editor Cindy Degner, January 11, 1973)

The poet who was once willing to receive her art in due time, now insists on seizing it: " I ought to be able to dig a trench in my soul and find something there." Clamoring for a find, she expects to simply set down rhymes and reap revelation. Yet in dispensing with revision, she shuns the very process which she once identified as the heart of writing. What the older poet flags as extraneous ("I hope it is well written but that seems extraneous"), the younger one once hailed as the "very stuff of poetry." Consider a letter she writes aspiring poet Jonathan Korso on August, 12, 1965. Cautioning Korso against just "letting the miracle just flow from the pen," the thirty-six year old Sexton contends: "Hell, I'm undisciplined too, in everything but my work...and the discipline the reworking the forging into being is the very stuff of poetry... the original impulse is only that" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.267). Late in her life when Sexton foregoes revision in a frenzied effort to lay bare her soul, she inadvertently strips away the one practice which could at least momentarily make that soul palpable and by extension, her life tolerable.

Once she jettisons her formidable revision practices, her writing becomes merely a mirror. She has no miracle or magic with which to unveil another possible self. Instead, she finds in her writing merely herself as she lives: "Do I not look in the mirror and see a drunken rat avert her eyes" (see Appendix N for complete poem) (A. Sexton, 1981, p.537). And this stark image serves only to reflect and make inescapable her degradation. Nothing new comes of her writing, nothing unexpected. Whatever she knows in life, she merely knows again in writing. The act of setting down experience in language yields no more than that. Tedious, relentless, her words chronicle the unrelieved horror of her days, making that horror only more certain and concrete.

As this unversed writing proliferates and prevails, she begins to regard her art with the same excruciating self-loathing with which she regards the rest of her life. While her letters muffle this disenchantment, "gloom is cheap but one writes what one must,"[22] her poetry declares it, no holds barred (L. Sexton, 1991, p.419). In her posthumously published volumes she refers to her own poetry as a "compulsion," a "latrine of my details" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.484) (See Appendix I for complete poem) and as "something crooked and vain and cut from a book" (A. Sexton, 1981, p. 508) (See Appendix U for complete poem). And although this rupture in her relationship to writing is but one of many, it is perhaps the most intimate and therefore the most significant.

To better understand this failed relationship and Sexton's own attendant suicide, I propose to study in depth the process of revision. For it is the practice and the quality of revision that separates her early work from her late work. To do so I will study the manuscript of one of Sexton's early poems, *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* (1962) (see Appendix O for complete poem). I choose this poem for two reasons. First, in contrast to poems that required 20-30 drafts of 300 typewritten pages, *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* emerged relatively quickly. As the product of an efficient drafting process, the poem offers itself as a useful candidate for the study of revision. For the work shows how--even in its condensed form--revision plays a critical role. That is, the poem underscores the fact that it is the nature, not the amount, of revision that matters most. Secondly, I choose this poem because in its focus on female emancipation, it anticipates a thematic concern that Sexton will take up again in some of her late unrevised work such as *Leaves that Talk* (1976)(see Appendix P for complete poem) and *Consecrating Mother* (1976) (see Appendix Q for complete poem). In *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* and these later works, female solidarity makes possible a particular kind of liberation: that is, by entering into communion with other women, the female persona in these poems finds a space in which she is able to exist in an uncompromised form. To the degree *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* shares this thematic focus with Sexton's later work, it allows us to see how the poem's revision process rather than its content affects Anne Sexton.

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[22] Letter to Erica Jong July 31, 1974.

What Is the Poem About?

Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound is one of three poems Sexton composes in response to a brief affair she has with fellow poet James Wright during a weekend on Montauk, Long Island in the summer of 1960. According to friend and colleague Maxine Kumin, the poem was drafted almost entirely the moment Anne sighted four nuns on an actual ferry crossing. Assuming the form of a letter to her ex-lover, the poem centers on a leave-taking. Working straight out of her own autobiographical past, Sexton begins the poem with a persona who has just broken off her affair. As this persona departs on the ferry to cross Long Island Sound, she oscillates between a fragile valiance ("I have made it this far as I said I would") and a bitter resignation. The prospect of setting off on her own means the prospect of existing defenseless in a treacherous world. In such a realm, that which might save is both useless ("a cement lifeboat") and hostile ("KEEP OFF" the sign reads suspended above it"). Forced to assume a self reliant stance ("Oh all right, I say,/ I'll save myself"), the persona's vehemence stands as a thin defense against "all the eyes of all the terrible fish who wait for me" (see Appendix S, p.207, for full manuscript).[23] Just as the persona confronts her bleak fate, she catches sight of four nuns. Her horizon shifts. Her estrangement--reconfigured in their image--unfolds before her as emancipation.

Quite literally making her own loveless condition parenthetical, the persona launches the body of the poem, declaring: "Oh God, although I am very sad, could you please let these four nuns loosen from their leather boots and their wooden chairs/ to rise out /over the greasy deck..." The nuns foray into the blue sky, their flight up over the "greasy deck" and over the seductive "winds that take the ears and toes of the rider" becomes the narrator's new focus. Attentive to this new sight--its paradoxes and peculiarities--the persona's world is enlarged. The world becomes more than she and her lost love. Telling the nuns' story rather than her own, she is allowed to reenact her predicament in a different frame to different effects. In doing so she transcends her despair over a lost affair and uncovers in leave-taking an occasion for celebration.

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[23] Thank you to the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin for permitting me access to this manuscript.

As the poem progresses, Sexton's persona enjoins us and her lover to behold her "dark girls." She thrills to the sight of the nuns' ascent. Unconventional as it is correct, the nuns' flight makes manifest another possible world in which a woman might, "loosen from her leather boots," from the restrictions of her order without fear. Leave-taking that was once imbued with dread is now replete with transcendence and possibility. "Flying four abreast, singing without sound, drinking the sky without smiles or hands or shoes" her dark girls epitomize the rightness, the fineness, the unorthodoxness of female self reliance.

In following this image, by placing herself in service of its thematic demand, Sexton permits the poem to realize her in another form. At least while she writes, Sexton "ceases to be real in order to be true" (Dufrenne, 1973, p.136). No longer real, she is not the dependent wife of Kayo Sexton and the seductive lover of numerous others. She is not the apprentice poet who writes coyly to mentor De Snodgrass November 15, 1958, "I am always being saved by men who understand me better than I understand myself" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.41). For a time, relieved of her dire need for love, she is someone else. As she expresses this condition in her own work, "Once I was beautiful, now I am myself" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.3).

What happens for Sexton in the drafting process?

By tracing the revision process in *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound*, I propose to explore how it is that Anne Sexton effaces herself to find herself.[24] I am particularly interested in the revising process as it is Sexton's capacity to revise that separates her life-bearing art from her death-bound texts.

Specifically, I contend that while she revises Sexton is compelled to work against the psychic pattern that predisposes her to self destruction. As she herself describes it, her madness consists of a deadly involution. The self folds in upon itself, collapsing, festering and eclipsing all that stands outside it. Admonishing aspiring poet Jonathan Korso to guard against such a condition, Sexton writes:

> As for madness.. hell! Most poets are mad. It doesn't qualify them for anything. Madness is a waste of time. It creates nothing. Even though I'm often crazy, and I am and I know it, still I fight it because I know how sterile and futile, how bleak..nothing grows form it and you, meanwhile, only grow into it like a snail. (L. Sexton, 1991, p.267).

Caught in the centripetal force of her madness, Sexton repeatedly refers to herself as smothering. Her own tears choke her, "tears clogged my throat" (see Appendix S, p.205, for complete manuscript). She suffocates. Her own internal motor usurps the space, "I have a motor in me that keeps vibrating, sucking up all the room" (L. Sexton,1991, p. 397). Her own gestures invade her. In "The Love

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[24] Thank you to Leo Mos for this phrase.

Plant" her persona sticks a rose behind her ear and it seeps into her brain and drives her insane, "and she will stick it (a rose) behind her ear/ not know it will crawl into her ear, her brain/ and drive her mad" (see Appendix V for complete poem) (A. Sexton, 1981, p.528). Damned by a self absorption so intense that it threatens to annihilate her, Sexton turns to writing.

As she writes, and more particularly as she revises, she finds that her emerging poetry can sometimes reverse the psychic pattern that generates this madness. For in grappling with the poem, Sexton may be turned away from her imploding self toward the work of art. To revise effectively is to respond to the call of the work. To say that which the poem wants to say, Sexton must subordinate her own pressing concerns to the thematic demands of the work. She must look upon her self with dispassion. She must draw from her memories, associations, feelings only that which furthers the work. Once she has given her self over to the work in this way, she cannot help but regard her internal world more objectively. That is, quite literally, her lies, transgressions, loves and griefs become like objects or materials. They appear before her but do not consume her. Instead, it is she who acts on them, arranging and "re-arranging the disaligned" (A. Sexton, 1981, p. 16) (see Appendix E for complete poem.) This shift reverses the prevailing psychic pattern that governs her day-to-day experience. Instead of existing as passive subject of her own mad vortex "I underwent a removal" (see Appendix J for complete poem) (A. Sexton, 1981, p.538), she can "Force discipline upon madness" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.268). She can find some order there in the "narrow diary" of the mind (A. Sexton, 1981, p.34). Transposing her life into poetry, she can reverse the pull of her madness. She can re-possess herself. She can become someone else.

The Phenomenological Artist

To appreciate this point more fully, I turn to the final version *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* and to Dufrenne's (1973) description of the phenomenological creator. The artist, Dufrenne proposes

> ...is often unequal, if not even markedly inferior, to his work, so much so that on meeting him we are surprised that he has created it. It seems that the creator whose act we describe is really the phenomenological creator who appears to the public only through his work. p.31

In looking at the arduous revisions that Sexton undertakes, I will show how at least while she works, she is able to make herself manifest as the "phenomenological creator."

In the initial stanzas of *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound*, Anne Sexton appears to us, via her persona, as she is in her day-to-day experience. Like her persona, Sexton is cornered. Like her persona, Sexton's vision imposes itself upon the world such that all she experiences is her own doubt, hostility and rage. As Anne writes in the poem, the perceived world for such a woman is nothing more than her own eyes.

Still I have eyes,
These are my eyes:

the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver
that hangs at my knees;
the cement lifeboat that wears
its dirty canvas coat
the faded sign that sits on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.

Moreover, her eyes are those that will not save: "the orange letters on the life preserver", "the cement lifeboat", "the faded sign that says KEEP OFF." In short, the opening stanzas render for us Anne Sexton caught in the vortex of her madness, seeing only herself and her own antipathy. Bitter, fearful and without recourse, the persona then encounters the small miracle of the poem: she sees something else. She sees the nuns.

Over my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club
their faces poked out
from under their habits
as good as good babies who
have sunk into their carriages.
Without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts

of their arms
I see what remains
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

Holy, unmarked by the secular world, the nuns are beings with souls. Though they, too, are subject to the constraints of the conventional world and the temptations of the secular world, they remain unaltered, incorruptible and on some level free. That is, though they sit like a bridge club undifferentiated, conforming, bound by their properness, determined by their institutions, they are not only that. Their being is not exhausted or explained by either their given nature: their physical bodies that resemble good babies, or by their historical nature: their habits, their leather boots, their wooden chairs. Rather something of who they are remains hidden, secret, inviolable, mysterious. In the nuns we find another Anne Sexton. We find Anne Sexton, the phenomenological creator. We find Anne Sexton, the poet who knows that life has depth, that appearances harbor secret lives. Describing what she does as she works and works to bring forth a poem, Sexton explains: "I'm hunting for the truth. It might be a kind of poetic truth, and not just a factual one, because behind everything that happens to you, every act, there is another truth, a secret life" (Marx, 1985, p.73).

Figuring the nuns, then as beings committed to refining the quality of their souls, Sexton shows how they do not yield to winds that pull the skirts of their arms without discrimination, leaving them "almost undressed."

Dearest
See how my dark girls sally forth,
over the passing lighthouse of Plum Gut,
its shell as rusty
as a camp dish
as fragile as a pagoda on a stone
out over the little lighthouse
that warns me of drowning winds
that rub over its blind bottom
and its blue cover;
winds that will take the toes and ears of the rider
or the lover.

Despite this seduction, they are not ravished--by the other or by their own passions. They are not taken and made vulnerable to abandonment, as the persona-narrator has been. Rather they are stoic, resolved, and though surrounded by worldly constraints and seductions, they are not finally subject to them. For they live in accord with a hidden absolute (an ever-present divinity both within and without) that supersedes such determinations. Their emancipation then can be imagined.

Like the persona, the nuns must loosen themselves from what binds them, "their leather boots, their wooden chairs, ... the greasy deck.." all that is obsolete, tradition-bound and constricting. And yet, when they do, the persona sees that they are not frail and fearful as she was. They are fragile only in so far as they are young, new, unevolved primitive as babies or fish: "nodding their pink heads to one side, flying four abreast/ in the old fashioned side stroke/ each mouth open and round/ breathing together as fish do."

They do not yet have voices. They do not yet have that which makes possible their individuation. But they have something equally meaningful: they have a solidarity "flying four abreast" that is impregnable for "singing together without sound" they commune in a language that is outside the rational, socially negotiated one. They are free then to speak themselves into being without interference from the outside world.

This vision of release shows us Anne Sexton in all her rich ambiguity, as a woman who is she is.[25] While in life Sexton venerates language, in her art Sexton can be found searching for a language that is not a language. As "singing without sound" in *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* serves to sequester the nuns from the intrusion of language, so too in *Keeping the City* (1976), (see Appendix C for complete poem) the watchman "guards" his child by refraining from speech: "The wings of the watchman/ if I spoke, would hurt the bird of your soul/ as he nested, bit, sucked, flapped" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.494) and in *Consecrating Mother* (1976) (see Appendix Q for complete poem) the narrator honors the oceanic mother by acknowledging that she exists outside language: "but I could not define her,/ I could not name her mood" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.555). Sexton the writer, as she presents in these works, aspires as ardently to transcend language as she does to create it.

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[25] "In what does this plurality of meaning originate?... in the ambiguity of man who is never what he is" (Dufrenne, 1973, p. 321).

In the closing stanza, Sexton, the phenomenological artist, also shows herself capable of a different relationship to death. Envisioning the nuns' death as a dissolution and a communion, Sexton departs from her standard suicidal ideation. Frequently in Sexton's work, the act of dissolving and becoming consubstantial with another woman (or lover[26]) constitutes suicide. In *Consecrating Mother* the persona longs to immerse herself in the ocean-mother and be subsumed, she longs to drown herself. In *Leaves That Talk* (1976) (see Appendix P for complete poem) the persona speaks of her green girls (the green leaves) as seducers to whom she wants to give herself: "they want me, they need me. I belong lying down under them" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.541).

In contrast to these late works, communion with women in *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* suggests solidarity and ascendance. While the nuns move in unison, swimming the old fashioned sidestroke together, singing in one voice, they do not dissolve into one another, nor does the narrator dissolve into them. Instead as they ascend, they become transparent, ethereal; their hands and shoes fade into the air. Their voices, their capacity to speak and to be, their capacity for self realization, meanwhile remains. Heading toward "the guazy edge of paradise," disappearing into the sky, they engage in a mystical union with the universe. And though this union involves a dissolution of sorts, this dissolution is suggestive of a holy, celebratory death rather than a despairing one. Rather than escaping into the ego of another, the Anne Sexton this closing stanza posits is an Anne Sexton who wishes to shed her ego, not to escape life, but rather so that she might open herself to the sky. Hence Sexton's persona-narrator, hears her dark girls transformation into an ethereal nothingness as "good news, good news:"

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[26] In *The Touch,* the narrator persona is both animating and annihilated by contact with the lover. In *Starry Night,* to be sucked up into the pulsating night is to be utterly subsumed, taken with "no cry."

> There go my dark girls,...
> See them rise
> on black wings, drinking
> the sky, without smiles
> or hands
> or shoes.
> They call back to us
> from the gauzy edge of paradise,
> good news, good news.

To review, then, the phenomenological artist, as *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound*" has realized her, is a woman who lives in accord with her own secret, whose reality is not given by or limited to social conventions. She is a woman who cannot be taken by another for she does not submit to seduction. She is a woman who trusts silence more than words. She is a woman who takes death to be a reunion with life itself. To know in her self this other of the poem, is to be redeemed. But this redemption only becomes available to her through the hard work of revision.

Revision: Sexton's Manuscript

To examine Sexton's drafting process, I begin with a study of her first handwritten draft and progress to a study of two exemplary sections from her typewritten drafts. Though there is no valorium edition of Sexton's manuscript, her first handwritten draft can be separated from subsequent typewritten ones. In this first draft, we can see that certain features of the poem are already in place. Sexton has set up the poem's dramatic structure. It is to be written as a letter to the ex-lover with the stanzas beginning "Dearest you." In addition, she has set out many of the poem's poetic phrases[27]:

> "the sea is the face of Mary grown old and rough with age,"
>
> (see Appendix S, p.204)
>
> "four nuns who sit like a bridge club,"
>
> (see Appendix S, p.200)
>
> "I am so surprised to see that the ocean is still going on."
>
> (see Appendix S, p.203)

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[27] I adapt this observation from one that Stephen Vinson (1992) originally makes in his article, *"Wild Animals Out in the Arena": Anne Sexton's Revisions for "All My Pretty One's."* In D. Oliphant & R. Bradford (Eds.) Rossetti to Sexton: Six Women Poets at Texas, (pp.191-221). Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

What is most interesting, however, for our purposes is that even in Sexton's original handwritten draft, we can see how her writing is allowing her to work against the pull of her madness. Immediately evident is the fact that the text on the nuns is drafted twice. That is, she has not merely scratched out phrases and re-worded parts as in the rest of her draft, rather she has actually rewritten the entire segment two times. Already, then Sexton is attending to the image that will permit her to speak of the things that "remain mute inside:" "I keep trying to force myself to speak of the things that remain mute inside. My poems only come when I have almost lost the ability to utter a word. To speak in a way of the unspeakable" (L. Sexton, 1991, p. 171). That is, she is attempting to move outside the tightly circumscribed circle in which her thoughts usually travel toward that which she does not yet know.

If we look closely at one of her handwritten texts, we can see how even in this early draft she struggles to move past her characteristic perceptions. Consider this segment:

> I watch how they wear their deep clothes,
> (how their deep clothes cover and cover them)
> that cover them closely,
> I see the wind suck up those veils
> without discrimination
> and I see suddenly that ankle and that chain
> and see

each dark cloth go square from its post
like the American flag in a picture
or now fat like the bowl of a sail
Look! WINGS! I see now It's
out from their unknown bodies are wings
wings caught from the blouse of their impassive shoulder
hidden wings, working as black works, for dear magic.
(see Appendix S, p.202)

The first image Sexton deploys in an effort to understand her own fascination with the nun's clothes returns her to a familiar theme. What might protect, "deep clothes that cover and cover," cannot: for the wind "disregards" them. But this theme is not the one Sexton is driven to pursue. She sets it down only to pass over it, to a more pressing concern: the myriad forms of the clothes. She is captivated by the different shapes their black habits assume: an American flag, a sail, wings, "Each dark cloth going square from its post, like the American flag, or now fat like the bowl of a sail/ Look! WINGS! I see now its/ wings ..."(see Appendix S, p.202). Capitalizing "WINGS," her handwriting itself registers her excitement. She has uncovered in the source image of an entirely different thematic focus. No longer obsessed with thoughts of attack and defense (clothes that cover or fail to cover), Sexton is taken aback, gladdened, surprised that these apparently docile creatures, "their faces poked out from their hoods like good babies," are gifted with the marvelous faculty of flight.

This shift from obsessing about doom to marveling over the nun's wings reflects a significant psychological leap. For the woman who describes herself as "running like little black sambo into smaller and smaller circles around my ego"[28] this shift constitutes a reversal (L. Sexton, 1991, p.239). Rather than circling round, she is now looking out of herself toward a sight that opens her toward what she is not. Recall for a moment, how the early stanzas of the final poem suggest that Sexton generally exists in a closed insular realm, ruled by cruelty and dread. What threatens cannot help but descend on what is vulnerable. Moreover, this cycle mercilessly repeats itself for Sexton dwells in the sealed realm of her own mad introversion ("these are my eyes the orange letters that spell/ ORIENT..") To wonder at the sight of the nuns, to see in their windblown habits--wings, to find in their impassive bodies--flight, is to break from that realm. For to follow this image, she must subordinate herself as she lives, to herself as she might be. Derealizing herself ("Dear God, although I am very sad, could you please let these four nuns loosen from their leather boots to rise up..") in an effort to uncover the shape of the poem, Sexton escapes the inescapable. She escapes herself.

To look at the gradual process of her revision is to see this "becoming"unfold. Once she has fastened onto the wings as a key image, she attempts to make the wonder of these wings clear by focusing on the clothes themselves. How strange and wondrous that flight inheres in their deep clothes. How improbable that wings should appear from impassive shoulders, or unknown bodies. How fantastic that these wings should offer "dear magic" (see Appendix S, p.202).

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[28] Letter to Anne Clarke, April 8, 1964.

Again, though, she must revise. For ultimately, Sexton does not want to figure the nuns as impassive bearers of magical winged clothes. Rather she wants their flight to be an outcome of their own agency. As her handwritten note on the bottom of one of the typed drafts explains: "I am not imploring God to let them loose, that is set them free.. I am asking that they be permitted to loosen themselves.."(see Appendix S, p.224, for complete manuscript). Slowly then she cuts away these elaborations, until she arrives at her final draft which reads:

without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts
of their arms
like wings
Almost undressed
I see what remains,
that holy wrist,
that ankle
that chain.

In this final draft, wings are mentioned but hardly celebrated. Rather the wonder of these wings is re-absorbed into the poem and appears in later stanzas as the wonder of what "my dark girls" can fly over: "the drowning winds that take the toes and ears of the rider." Her dark girls can rise over these erotic winds.

They can move moreover, into a leeward air that does not undress or ravish but merely floats them: "there go my dark girls,/ their dresses puff/ in the leeward air." This ascent gives cause to marvel for it places the nuns in a realm where they are no longer subject to an aggressive sexuality. The wonder of these wings has been re-located so that it resides within the nuns and the act of their ascent.

This vision transfigures the author in at least two ways. First, for Anne Sexton to be capable of surprise (Sexton expresses surprise as she sees not a flag, not a sail, but WINGS!) is to be incapable of suicide. To be capable of surprise, Sexton must permit life to show her what she does not yet know she is, or loves, or wants to be. Anne Sexton in life continually seeks a more intimate and exciting lover who can subsume her and on whom she can be utterly dependent. Anne Sexton the poet, the phenomenological creator, finds excitement in the vision of female self-reliance. To make present in herself an openness such that she can aspire to something utterly new and unanticipated, is to make present in herself a desire to live. And it is perhaps referring to such an experience that Sexton declares: "Poetry and poetry alone has saved my life"[29] (L. Sexton, 1991, p.81). Secondly, to revise this wonder into a kind of grace that relieves her of her own sexual aggression is to momentarily make available to her another way of "wearing her womanhood,"[30] Sexton is a woman for whom seduction is a primary way of forming relationship. Upon first meeting her psychiatrist, Dr. Martin Orne, for example, she concedes perhaps there is one thing she's good at: seducing men. Later having become a poet, she reflects again on her promiscuity. In May of 1961 she tells Dr. Orne of an incident in which fellow poet Anthony Hecht gallantly refuses her sexual advances. Explaining her need to pursue him she said, "It's not that I want to go to bed with him; I want to be sure he loves me. This (wanting) is like pills or drugs but much more complex" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 147). In fact, at the time she writes *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* her aggressive sexuality is in full view. Her biographer, Diane Middlebrook, indicates she has had three extramarital affairs: 1958 with Jerry, a fellow student at Boston Center for Education, 1959 with George Starbuck, fellow poet, 1960 with James Wright, fellow poet and has attempted to initiate at least two others: 1958 with Robert Lowell, poet and mentor, 1961 with Anthony Hecht, fellow poet. To fathom a realm in which her sexuality would be neutralized, in which it would present merely as leeward wind, is to radically re-vision her womanhood. *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* suggests that nuns who ascend through a leeward air can survive without concrete happiness, (smiles, hands shoes) or material sustenance (they drink the sky.) Briefly then, Sexton as artist envisions a condition in which her soul might be opened and her body calmed. For Anne Sexton the suburban housewife who is perpetually hungering for nurturance and sexuality--or perhaps nuturance in the form of sex--such a condition is an emancipation of the highest order.

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[29] Letter to De Snodgrass June 9, 1959.

[30] Letter to De Snodgrass, November 15, 1958: "I have no place loving you and because I let you be my god for a while, I was in need of loving, of giving love, and not wise, nor cagey, nor -- just walking around waring my womanhood and trying to keep us all sane" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.41).

Revision: Cutting the manuscript

So far we have traced a type of revision in which Sexton successively builds toward a particular image, honing it, refining it until it captures her meaning. But this is not by any means all that Sexton's revisions entail. A significant part of Sexton's drafting process also involves cutting away. In this next section, I would like to examine Sexton's slow progression toward emancipation by looking at what she finally does not write.

Two kinds of text in particular interest me here. One is her maudlin sentimental verse (intended for her lover audience) and the other is her morbid malevolent verse (intended, it seems, for herself). Sexton's maudlin verse, though bad, is the less psychologically dangerous of the two. Consider the following text and its revision:

> Oh goddamn, my heart, I'm
> riding backwards
> Oh, is it too sad to look at this?
> Oh Dearest you--
> hear my eyes?
> I love you,! (see Appendix S, p.204)

or her revision of this text:

B.S. I cannot sing about love
I'm riding backwards,
watching the land I've left
as the long angry wake
of my boat connects us;
the color,
if you stopped time
of marble. (see Appendix S, p.208)

Next to the top line of the revised version of this stanza, Sexton scribbles "B.S." (I read this as: "bull shit" in the context of her free use of expletives). Her note suggests that in looking again, she finds her persona's claim false, and hard to tolerate. To cut this text, is to momentarily rid herself of the Anne Sexton who is repeatedly getting caught in "costumes of her own making."[31] She is a fabricator. For a moment she sees herself as others see her. She is a woman who attempts to discourage her psychiatrist from taking a research leave by inventing a story about a childhood molestations at the hand of a family friend.[32] She is the woman who is so prone to hysterical display that her family suspects her of a ruse when she claims that poetry and therapy are crucial to her well being.[33] She is a woman who negotiated a reduced fee with her last psychiatrist by claiming she was solely responsible for both her daughters college educations. In truth, Kayo, her divorced husband, was paying tuition bills. Confessing what she called her "truth crimes," to her psychiatrist Dr. Orne in 1956, Sexton explained: "In fact, it comes down to the terrible truth that there is no true part of me...I am nothing, if not an actress off stage" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.62).

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[31] Letter to Joyce Carol Oates, "After all, it is my fault. I did write about it (being crazy) thoroughly, explored it so I made my own costume, so to speak, and at each reading I must step into it, althoguht it no longer fits, and I do everything within my power to act perfectly normal and charming and win them over" (L. Sexton, 1991, p. 396).

[32] At the end of April (1956) she (Anne Sexton) told him (Dr. Orne) a story (about being molested by an older man, a family friend, while swimming at Squirrel Island) that she knew she had made up on the spot" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.62).

[33] Middlebrook reports how Kayo blew up one mornign when Sexton announced she was planning to attend the Antioch Writers Conference. He "told her that poetry was an indulgence, just as her psychiatry was an indulgence and he was tired fo trying to explain her selfish behavior

To cut these maudlin lines, an obvious enough choice even for the untrained eye, is more significant than it appears. To cut these lines entails taking her actress off stage and Sexton without the actress is at risk. The actress is powerful. The actress procures desirables for her. In her relations with men, for example, she explains to Dr.Orne that her seductive power arises from her neediness. Describing how this need serves she explains to Orne: "It's not that I'm beautiful; its just that I can make some men fall in love with me, ... if I want to push it I just say, 'I need you' " (Middlebrook, 1991, p.148). To figure herself as a woman who marks her own path ("I have made it this far as I said I would") and who endorses other women who do the same ("See how my dark girls sally forth...") is to momentarily stand ready to give up the sure devise. By reconsidering her spontaneous text, by reflecting, she is able to restrain. Driven by the desire to make art, to write more than she knows she knows, to find the true life behind the other life, she can make "some form of integrity." As Sexton herself explains, "The effort," in writing a poem, " is to try to get some form of integrity when you write a poem, some whole life lived..."(Marx, 1985, p.82). Exerting

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to boths sides of the family (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 79).

this effort in the process of revision, Anne Sexton can overcome her immediate preferences and constitute her subjectivity in another manner.

In editing her other text, the text I describe as her morbid, malevolent verse, Sexton's task is the similar but decidedly more difficult. Though she says of her seductiveness "I'm going to die of this, its a disease," (Middlebrook, 1991, p.148) her seductiveness is not finally her most treacherous psychological foe. More terrible than her aggressive sexuality is her despair and rage. We see this condition expressed in what I have termed her morbid, malevolent verse.

In this verse, Sexton proffers a vision in which the persona is incarcerated in an evil, cancerous realm. In such a world the question of female agency is obviated. Agency itself has long since been dismissed. In addressing her listener, "Dearest you," the speaker is not so much crying out for help--the world as she depicts it is beyond salvation--rather she is merely offering herself up as piteous. Over time, such a purpose wears thin. Her writing itself a dubious act.

Enroute to her final poem, Sexton develops a stanza of this kind that in its most elaborated version reads:

> Dearest you
> outside the distortions
> of my overanalyzed head
> I listen
> to the drowned wood of the wharf
> the bad rhythm of its oily water

where it swells morbidly
a thick bubble
like a tumor
Over me I hear the sun hiss
the sky is without gulls
or humor. (see Appendix S, p.215)

What is interesting about this stanza is that it was not in Sexton's initial handwritten draft. She actually writes it *into* the poem during the revision process. Moreover, she is reluctant to let it go. In the course of eleven drafts of this text, she will work that stanza over six times in an effort to make it fit (see Appendix S, pp.206,211,215,217-219). What this fact suggests is that her rewriting does not always constitute revision. For although this text arises as Sexton reconsiders her spontaneous initial draft, and although it is reworked, elaborated, and edited, it is finally a text whose meaning is circumscribed. Sexton can use neither rhythm nor metaphor to open up other possible meanings. The more fastidiously she describes her horror, the more fixed it becomes. Actual re-vision is not possible in such a text because there is nothing to be discovered, there is nothing yet to be found out. The woman this verse posits is the very woman Sexton's letters show her to be. Consider a letter Sexton writes to Erica Jong, June 1974, urging Jong to ignore critics and get on with her writing. "You must write," Sexton insists, so that "others can crawl closer to the truth ... the listener, awaits trembling on the sore hole of his own abyss and he needs you!"(L. Sexton, 1991, p. 414). The reader figured in this letter, "trembling on the sore hole of his own abyss," is none other than the persona who stands under "sky that is without gulls or humor." Both are but Sexton as she lives.

What distinguishes this malevolent text from her maudlin text, however, is that her rewrites of the former show so little capacity to reflect. Though she looks again upon her morbid text, she does not do so with insight. She does not do so from another perspective. She does not, in short, write beside this text "B.S." Her more limited ability to critique the malevolent text can be seen if we look at both texts surface in the final poem. Where her maudlin verse appears as a parenthetical statement, "Dear God, although I am very sad, could you please let these nuns loosen..." her malevolent verse appears as an entire stanza: "Still/ I have eyes/ these are my eyes, the orange letters that spell/ ORIENT on the life preserver that hangs at my knees, the cement life boat that wears its dirty canvas coat, the faded sign that reads "KEEP OFF./ Oh, all right, I say, I'll save myself."

Doing much the same work as the malevolent text from her manuscript, this stanza in the final poem presents a world that is hostile. What we see then is that even in her finished work, Sexton has not been able to revise or re-see her world. Rather, she has merely been able, for the sake of the flow of the poem to truncate her description of it. She has omitted the notion that the world is diseased, tumor-like. But even this concession was hard to exact as Sexton's six drafts indicate.

What this examination of her manuscript allows us to see, then, is that Sexton's proclivity to set down her corrupted soul in its full denigration does not rise up suddenly in her late years and overwhelm her. Rather it exists ever-present in her work as in her living. Consider this line from a collection of poems written in 1964: "The trees are whores yet you place me under them. The sun is poison yet you toss me under it like a rose" (see Appendix W for complete poem) (A. Sexton, 1981, p.568). What changes at the end of Sexton's life is that she no longer has the strength to make something else exist as well,[34] to "forge it into being."[35] For as Dufrenne puts it: "the true problem of art is an ontological problem... The artist wishes to make something exist and not to make it beautiful" (Dufrenne, 1973, p. 144).

Revision required of Sexton tremendous exertion. Compelling as the possibility of artistic transfiguration is, the act of subordinating herself to poetry was not an easy one. Her mad self was constantly in the fore pressing for supremacy. In fact, when describing her writing process to interviewer Patricia Marx, Sexton speaks of it as a "fight,"

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[34] What Sexton produces once she has discarded "anything that is too interruptive or costly emotionally," is but more malevolent verse. In the last 3 years of her life, for example, she writes *45 Mercy Sreet* (1976), a volume that is dominated by the notion that a given place, or body or social arrangement (such as marriage) has become perverted, diseased, infected and as such is unendurable. In "The Love Plant," a flowering plant invades the narrator growing into her lungs, heart and throat. Attempts to destroy it are futile and the malignant green "hisses on": "I light matches and put them in my mouth,/and my teeth melt but the greenery hisses on" (A. Sexton, 1976, p.528). In "Landscape Winter," the surrounding snow is like a drug addict: "The snow far off on the pine nesting into the needls like addicts into their fix"(A. Sexton, 1976, p.511). In "The Money Swing" what might comfort, a smile, soon reveals itself as an inflamed affliction: "I know your smile will develop a boil"(A. Sexton, 1976, p.488). Repeatedly the seemingly benign, a green plant, the far off snow, a smile, is actually ripe with insideous afflictions. The sheer fixedness of these images, their consistent reiteration of but one theme, helps us grasp the oppressive, perseverative mind state under which the mad Anne Sexton labors.

[35] Letter to Jonathan Korso: August 12, 1965, "the discipline, the reworking, the forging into being is the stuff of poetry" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.267).

> For one lyric poem I rewrote about 300 typewritten pages. You have to look back at all those bad words, bad metaphors, everything stated wrong and then see how it came into being, the slow progress of it, because you are always fighting to find out what it is you want to say (Marx, 1985, p.73).

The fight to stay the poem was life for Sexton. And yet as she enters into middle age her energy flags. This fight becomes harder to sustain. Earlier in her life while many of her ferocious needs for love and care were being addressed--while her house was cleaned by her maid, her children tended by her mother-in-law, and her household managed primary by her husband, her ego nurtured by friends, lovers, colleagues and successive successes--in this early phase, she could marshal the requisite energy to master the poem. Her intense drive in combination with these support systems made such mastery possible. But as she ages, as loneliness, alcoholism, sleeping pills and tranquilizers eviscerate her already compromised resources, she cannot. Revealing the thin strand of life force on which she must sustain herself as she nears the end of her life, Sexton writes to Donald Hall on December 12, 1973 less than a year before she dies: "But there's just so much time and if one feels committed, as I do, to writing SOMETHING--for good or bad--then one must absolutely discard anything that is too interruptive or costly emotionally" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.401).

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herself and having herself as her only terminus, she is temporarily able to realize herself as another.[37] At least while she writes in this revisionary mode, she is, like the nuns, able to drink the sky. Infused with he fullness (that is a direct counterpart of her openness) all the living earth becomes available to her. So it is that as the phenomenological creator, she can, as she writes "with used furniture make a tree" (see Appendix X for complete poem) (A.Sexton, 1962, p.88). That is, she can out of that which is inert, madness, make that which is alive, a poem. As she revises, so can she live.

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[37] "To reflect is to become a voice, rather than an echo" (Dufrenne, 1973, p. 371). To revise is to compose rather than repeat.

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A Retrospective Anne Sexton: the Writer and the Suicide

Looking back at Anne Sexton as I have encountered her in her art, I see in part how it was that poetry both saved and failed to save. I see somewhat unexpectedly for example, that Anne Sexton the suicide can be found in her good and bad poetry alike. She is not simply someone made manifest by her late unrevised texts. She can be found in the manuscripts of *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound*, projecting a world in which the very sun hisses with animosity. She can be found in *Pain for a Daughter*, as a mother whose narcissistic love will not allow her daughter's life to exceed her own. She can be found in *The Touch* elaborating her favorite death wish whereby the right touch arouses and subsumes her. Her face is always the same. Her gaze is turned inward. It is often malevolent and when this face bears the expression of love, it is turned either toward her own double image or toward that which promises to excite and obliterate her. To see her in her work suggests that though she ascribed to poetry the power to save ("I could be sitting around thinking about ways to kill myself but I would rather be writing poetry") poetry did not actually alter her (D. Middlebrook, 1991,p.52).

What poetry did was it provided her with the specialized conditions she needed so she could try to refigure herself--and try she did. The fierce determination with which she worked marked her profound desire to establish herself as a subject-in-progress. Describing this endeavor, Sexton explains, "I will take a crowbar and pry out the broken pieces of God in me. Just like a jigsaw puzzle, I will put Him together with the patience of a chess player" (see Appendix R for complete poem) (A. Sexton, 1981, p.418). For a time despite her meager emotional resources, she could marshal the strength and the patience to pry God out of her. It did happen that in her poetic texts, she could revitalize her symbolic capacities. But the work she had to do was immense. And if, as it appears, she never managed to overthrow the stories she commonly ascribed to herself, she did manage to augment them. Perhaps then what poetry did was not save her but salvage her. Perhaps, as Juhasz (1988) proposes, it allowed her to "hold death at bay" (p.333).[38] It sustained her as a subject-in-crisis. It brought forth a strength and patience that no other aspect of her life could elicit.

Let us accept for a moment that this is how poetry served Anne Sexton, and let me now turn to the question of how poetry provided Anne with such a place. I propose that the power of Sexton's poetry comes out of the silences, the resonances and the untranslatable images with which she worked. It is from these materials that she shapes a presence in *Pain for a Daughter*, forms for a body in *The Truth the Dead Know* and renders a vision of female emancipation in *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound*. To understand why this might be so I turn to Derrida's (1995) *The Gift of Death*.[39] In this volume, Derrida proposes that it is in our secrets and our silences that we exist as singular, unique, responsible beings rather than in our words. Countering Taylor's (1989) claim that we make ourselves in language, Derrida suggests that when we give ourselves over to language, we relieve ourselves of our individuality. We make of ourselves something shared.

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[38] Juhasz, S. (1988) "The Excitable Gift": The Poetry of Anne Sexton. In S.E. Colburn (Ed.) Anne Sexton Telling the Tale. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
[39] Derrida, J. (1995) The Gift of Death. (D. Willis Trans.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

> ...as soon as one speaks, as soon as one enters the medium of language, one loses that very singularity...The first effect or first destination of language therefore involves depriving me of or delivering me from, my singularity. By suspending my absolute singularity in speaking, I renounce at the same time my liberty and my responsibility. Once I speak I am never and no longer myself, alone and unique. It is a very strange contract--both paradoxical and terrifying-- that binds infinite responsibility to silence and secrecy (p.60).

Might it be that poetry salvages Anne Sexton because as she puts herself into words she also bequeaths on herself silences and secrets? So we find her present in her resonances and embodied by her lyricism.

Consider furthermore, what Derrida's claim might mean for the phenomenological creator. Dufrenne (1973) explains that space is "designated, outlined by turning toward something which we are not and preparing to receive it. By opening ourselves up that which we are not" p. 244.[40] This opening is also always a committing according to Dufrenne. Anne Sexton's poetry both commits and opens her. In casting the poem, she shapes a space for herself not only in the silences and the unarticulable sentience that surround her words, but also in the act with which she makes ready to write. By turning toward the call of the work, by searching for that which she cannot yet find, she creates a space that opens out onto a secret. Standing ready in this manner to receive what is given to her by composing, Anne has withdrawn, she has made ready. Perhaps, looking out over the expanse that is but herself unrevealed, she exists in her absolute singularity.

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[40] Dufrenne, M. (1973). The phenomenology of aesthetic experience. (E. S. Casey, A. A. Anderson, W. Domingo, L. Jacobson Trans.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press. (Original work published in 1953)

Appendixes

Appendix A

Pain for a Daughter

Blind with love, my daughter
has cried nightly for horses,
those long-necked marchers and churners
that she has mastered, any and all,
reigning them in like a circus hand--
the excitable muscles and the ripe neck;
tending this summer, a pony and a foal.
She who is too squeamish to pull
a thorn from the dog's paw,
watched her pony blossom with distemper,
the underside of the jaw swelling
like an enormous grape.
Gritting her teeth with love,
she drained the boil and scoured it
with hydrogen peroxide until pus
ran like milk on the barn floor.

Blind with loss all winter,
in dungarees, a ski jacket and a hard hat,
she visits the neighbors' stable,
our acreage not zoned for barns;
they who own the flaming horses
and the swan-whipped thoroughbred
that she tugs at and cajoles,
thinking it will burn like a furnace
under her small-hipped English seat.

Blind with pain she limps home.
The thoroughbred has stood on her foot.
He rested there like a building.
He grew into her foot until they were one.
The marks of the horseshoe printed
into her flesh, the tips of her toes
ripped off like pieces of leather,
three toenails swirled like shells
and left to float in blood in her riding boot.

Blind with fear, she sits on the toilet,

her foot balanced over the washbasin,
her father, hydrogen peroxide in hand,
performing the rites of the cleansing.
She bites on a towel, sucked in breath,
sucked in and arched against the pain,
her eyes glancing off me where
I stand at the door, eyes locked
on the ceiling, eyes of a stranger,
and then she cries...
Oh my God help me!
Where a child would have cried *Mama!*
Where a child would have believed *Mama!*
she bit the towel and called on God
and I saw her life stretch out...
I saw her torn in childbirth,
and I saw her, at that moment,
in her own death and I knew that she
knew.

Appendix B

Double Image

1.
I am thirty this November.
You are still small, in your fourth year.
We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,
flapping in the winter rain,
falling flat and washed. And I remember
mostly the three autumns you did not live her.
They said I'd never get you back again.
I tell you what you'll never really know:
all the medical hypothesis
that explained my brain will never be as true as these
struck leaves letting go.

I, who chose two times
to kill myself, had said your nickname
the mewling months when you first came;
until a fever rattled
in your throat and I moved like a pantomime
above your head. Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame,
I heard them say, was mine. They tattled
like green witches in my head, letting doom
leak like a broken faucet;
as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet,
an old debt I must assume.

Death was simpler than I'd thought.
The day life made you well and whole I let the witches take away my guilty soul.
I pretended I was dead
until the white men pumped the poison out,
putting me armless and washed through the rigmarole
of talking boxes and the electric bed.
I laughed to see the private iron in that hotel.
Today the yellow leaves
go queer. You ask me where they go. I say today believed
in itself, or else it fell.

Today, my small child, Joyce,
love your self's self where it lives.
There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,
why did I let you grow
in another place. You did not know my voice

when I came back to call. All the superlatives
of tomorrow's white tree and mistletoe
will not help you know the holidays you had to miss.
The time I did not love
myself, I visited your shoveled walks; you held my glove.
There was new snow after this.

2.
They sent me letters with news
of you and I made moccasins that I would never use.
When I grew well enough to tolerate
myself, I lived with my mother. Too late,
too late, to live with your mother, the witches said.
But I didn't leave. I had my portrait
done instead.

Part way back from Bedlam
I came to my mother's house in Gloucester,
Massachusetts. And this is how I came
to catch at her; and this is how I lost her.
I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said.
And she never could. She had my portrait
done instead.

I lived like an angry guest,
like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child.
I remember my mother did her best.
She took me to Boston and had my hair restyled.
Your smile is like your mother's, the artist said.
I didn't seem to care. I had my portrait
done instead.

3.
All that summer sprinklers arched
over the seaside grass.
We talked of drought
while the salt-parched
field grew sweet again. To help time pass
I tried to mow the lawn
and in the morning I had my portrait done,
holding my smile in place, till it grew formal.
Once I mailed you a picture of a rabbit
and a postcard of Motif number one,
as if it were normal
to be a mother and be gone.

They hung my portrait in the chill
north light, matching
me to keep me well.
Only my mother grew ill.
She turned from me, as if death were catching,
as if death transferred,
as if my dying had eaten inside her.
That August you were two, but I timed my days with doubt.
On the first September she looked at me
and said I gave her cancer.
They carved her sweet hills out
and still I couldn't answer.

4.
That winter she came
part way back
from her sterile suite
of doctors, the sea-sick
cruise of the X-ray,
the cells' arithmetic
gone wild. Surgery incomplete,
the fat arm, the prognosis poor, I heard
them say.

During the sea blizzards
she had her
own portrait painted.
A cave of a mirror
placed on the south wall;
matching smile, matching contour.
And you resembled me; unacquainted
with my face, you wore it. But you were mine
after all.

I wintered in Boston,
childless bride,
nothing sweet to spare
with witches at my side.
I missed your babyhood,
tried a second suicide,
tried the sealed hotel a second year.
On April Fool you fooled me. We laughed and this
was good.

5.
I checked out for the last time
on the first of May;
graduate of the mental cases,
with my analyst's okay,
my complete book of rhymes,
my typewriter and my suitcases.

All that summer I learned life
back into my
seven rooms, visited the swan boats,
the market, answered the phone,
served cocktails as a wife
should, made love among my petticoats

and August tan. And you came each
weekend. But I lie.
You seldom came. I just pretended
you, small piglet, butterfly
girl with jelly bean cheeks,
disobedient three, my splendid

stranger. and I had to learn
why I would rather
die than love, how your innocence
would hurt and how I gather
guilt like a young intern
his symptoms, his certain evidence.

That October day we went
to Gloucester the red hills
reminded me of the dry red fur fox
coat I played in as a child; stock-still
like a bear or a tent,
like a great cave laughing or a red fur fox.

We drove past the hatchery,
the hut that sells bait,
past Pigeon Cove, past the Yacht Club, past Squall's
Hill, to the house that waits
still, on the top of the sea,
and two portraits hang on opposite walls.

6.
In north light, my smile is held in place,

the shadow marks my bone.
What could I have been dreaming as I sat there,
all of me waiting in the eyes, the zone
of the smile, the young face,
the foxes snare.

In south light, her smile held in place,
her cheeks wilted like a dry
orchid; my mocking mirror, my overthrown
love, my first image. She eyes me from that face,
that stony head of death
I had outgrown.

The artist caught us at the turning;
we smiled in our canvas home
before we chose our foreknown separate ways.
The dry red fur fox coat was made for burning.
I rot on the wall, my own
Dorian Gray.

And this was the cave of the mirror,
that double woman who stares
at herself, as if she were petrified
in time -- two ladies sitting in umber chairs.
You kissed your grandmother
and she cried.

7.
I could not get you back
except for weekends. You came
each time, clutching the picture of a rabbit
that I had sent you. For the last time I unpack
your things. We touch from habit.
The first visit you asked my name.
Now you stay for good. I will forget
how we bumped away from each other like marionettes
on strings. It wasn't the same
as love, letting weekends contain
us. You scrape your knee. You learn my name,
wobbling up the sidewalk, calling and crying.
You call me mother and I remember my mother again,
somewhere in greater Boston, dying.

I remember we named you Joyce
so we could call you Joy.

You came like an awkward guest
that first time, all wrapped and moist
and strange at my heavy breast.
I needed you. I didn't want a boy,
only a girl, a small milky mouse
of a girl, already loved, already loud in the house
of herself. We named you Joy.
I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind me.
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure
nor soothe it. I made you to find me.

Appendix C

Keeping the City

Unless the Lord keepeth the city, the watchman
guardeth in vain--John F. Kennedy's unspoken words
in Dallas on November 23, 1963.

Once in August,
head on your chest,
I heard winds
battering up the place,
something inside trying to fly out
and I was silent
and attentive,
the watchman.
I was your small public,
your small audience
but it was you that was clapping,
it was you untying the snarls and knots,
the webs, all bloody and gluey;
you with your twelve tongues and twelve wings
beating, wresting, beating, beating
your way out of childhood,
that airless net that fastened you down.

Since then I was more silent
though you had gone miles away,
tearing down, rebuilding the fortress.
I was there
but could do nothing
but guard the city
lest it break.
I was silent.
I had the strange idea I could overhear
but that your voice, tongue, wing
belonged solely to you.
The Lord was silent too.
I did not know if he could keep you whole,
where I, miles away, yet head on your chest,
could do nothing. Not a single thing.

The wings of the watchman,
if I spoke, would hurt the bird of your soul
as he nested, bit, sucked, flapped.
I wanted him to fly, burst like a missile from your throat,

burst from the spidery-mother-web,
burst from Woman herself
where too many had laid out lights
that stuck to you and left a burn
that smarted into your middle age.

The city
of my choice
that I guard
like a butterfly, useless, useless
in her yellow costume, swirling
swirling around the gates.
The city shifts, falls, rebuilds,
and I can do nothing.
A watchman
should be on the alert,
but never cocksure.
And the Lord --
who knows what he keepeth?

Appendix D

The Fortress

while taking a nap with Linda

Under the pink quilted covers
I hold the pulse that counts your blood.
I think the woods outdoors
are half asleep,
left over from summer
like a stack of books after a flood,
left over like those promises I never keep.
On the right, the scrub pine tree
waits like a fruit store
holding up bunches of tufted broccoli.

We watch the wind from our square bed.
I press down my index finger --
half in jest, half in dread --
on the brown mole
under your left eye, inherited
from my right cheek: a spot of danger
where a bewitched worm ate its way through our soul
in search of beauty. My child, in July
the elves have been fed
secretly from a pool of beet-red dye.

And sometimes they are battle green
with trunks as we as hunter's boots,
smacked hard by the wind, clean
as oilskins. No,
the wind's not off the ocean.
Yes, it cried in your room like a wolf
and your pony tail hurt you. That was a long time ago.
The wind rolled the tide like a dying
woman. she wouldn't sleep,
she rolled there all night, grunting and sighing.

Darling, life is not in my hands;
life with its terrible changes
will take you, bombs or glands,
your own child at
your breast, your own house on your own land.
Outside the bittersweet turns orange.

Before she died, my mother and I picked those fat
branches, finding orange nipples
on the gray wire strands.
We weeded the forest, curing trees like cripples.

Your feet thump-thump against my back
and you whisper to yourself. Child,
what are you thinking? What pact
are you making?
What mouse runs between your eyes? What ark
can I feel for you when the world goes wild?
The woods are underwater, their weeds are shaking
in the tide; birches like zebra fish
flash by in a pack.
Child, I cannot promise that you will get your wish.

I cannot promise very much.
I give you the images I know.
Lie still with me and watch.
A pheasant moves
by like a seal, pulled through the mulch
by his thick white collar. He's on show
like a clown. He drags a beige feather that he removed,
one time, form an old lady's hat.
We laugh and we touch.
I promise you love. Time will not take away that.

Appendix E

Her Kind

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind.

I have found the warm caves in the woods,
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
closets, silks, innumerable goods;
fixed suppers for the worms and the elves:
whining, rearranging the disaligned.
A woman like that is misunderstood.
I have been her kind.

I have ridden in your cart driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor
where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
I have been her kind.

Appendix F

The Truth the Dead Know

For my mother, born March 1902, died March 1959
and my father, born February 1900, died June 1959

Gone, I say and walk from church,
refusing the stiff procession to the grave,
letting the dead ride alone in the hearse.
It is June. I am tired of being brave.

We drive to the Cape. I cultivate
myself where the sun gutters from the sky,
where the sea swings in like an iron gate
and we touch. In another country people die.

My darling, the wind falls in like stones
from the whitehearted water and when we touch
we enter touch entirely. No one's alone.
Men kill for this, or for as much.

And what of the dead? They lie without shoes
in their stone boats. They are more like stone
than the sea would be if it stopped. They refuse
to be blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone.

Appendix G

The Touch

For months my hand has been sealed off
in a tin box. Nothing was there but subway railings.
Perhaps it is bruised, I thought,
and that is why they have locked it up.
But when I looked in it lay there quietly.
You could tell time by this, I thought,
like a clock, by its five knuckles
and the thin underground veins.
It lay there like an unconscious woman
fed by tubes she knew not of.

The hand had collapsed,
a small wood pigeon
that had gone into seclusion.
I turned it over and the palm was old,
its lines traced like fine needlepoint
and stitched up into the fingers.
It was fat and soft and blind in places.
Nothing but vulnerable.

And all this is metaphor.
An ordinary hand--just lonely
for something to touch
that touches back.
The dog won't do it.
Her tail wags in the swamp for a frog.
I'm no better than a case of dog food.
She owns her own hunger.
My sisters won't do it.
They live in school except for buttons
and tears running down like lemonade.
My father won't do it.
He comes with the house and even at night
he lives in a machine made by my mother
and well oiled by his job, his job.
The trouble is
that I'd let my gestures freeze.
The trouble was not
in the kitchen or the tulips
but only in my head, my head.

Then all this became history.
Your hand found mine.
Life rushed to my fingers like a blood clot.
Oh, my carpenter,
the fingers are rebuilt.
They dance in the attic and in Vienna.
My hand is alive all over America.
Not even death will stop it,
death shedding her blood.
Nothing will stop it, for this is the kingdom
and the kingdom come.

Appendix H

Little Girl My String Bean, My Lovely Woman

My daughter, at eleven
(almost twelve), is like a garden.

Oh, darling! Born in that sweet birthday suit
and having owned it and known it for so long,
now you must watch high noon enter --
noon, that ghost hour.

Oh, funny little girl -- this one under a blueberry sky,
this one! How can I say that I've known
just what you know and just where you are?

It's not a strange place, this odd home
where your face sits in my hand
so full of distance,
so full of its immediate fever.
The summer has seized you,
as when, last month in Amalfi, I saw
lemons as large as your desk-side globe --
that miniature map of the world --
and I could mention, too,
the market stalls of mushrooms
and garlic buds all engorged.
Or I think even of the orchard next door,
where the berries are done
and the apples are beginning to swell.
And once, with our first backyard,
I remember I planted an acre of yellow beans
we couldn't eat.

Oh, little girl
my stringbean
how do you grow?
You grow this way.
You are too many to eat.

I hear as in a dream
the conversation of old wives
speaking of womanhood.

I remember that I heard nothing myself.
I was alone.
I waited like a target.

Let high noon enter --
the hour of the ghosts.
Once the Romans believed
that noon was the ghost hour,
and I can believe it, too,
under the startling sun,
and someday they will come to you
someday, men bare to the waist, young Romans
at noon where they belong,
with ladders and hammers
while no one sleeps.

But before they enter
I will have said,
Your bones are lovely,
and before their strange hands
there was always this hand that formed.

Oh, darling, let your body in
let it tie you in,
in comfort.
What I want to say, Linda,
is that woman are born twice.

If I could have watched you grow
as a magical mother might,
if I could have seen through magical transparent belly,
there would have been such ripening within:
your embryo,
the seed taking on its own,
life clapping the bedpost,
bones from the pond,
thumbs and two mysterious eyes,
the awfully human head,
the heart jumping like a puppy,
the important lungs,
the becoming --
while it becomes!
as it does now,
a world of its own
a delicate place.

I say hello
to such shakes and knockings and high jinks,
such music, such sprouts,
such dancing-mad-bears of music,
such necessary sugar,
such goings-on!

Oh, little girl,
my stringbean,
how do you grow?
You grow this way.
You are too many to eat.

What I want to say, Linda,
is that there is nothing in your body that lies.
All that is new is telling the truth.
I'm here, that somebody else,
an old tree in the background.

Darling,
stand still at your door,
sure of yourself, a white stone, a good stone --
as exceptional as laughter
you will strike fire
that new thing!

Appendix I

Talking Sheep

My life
has appeared unclothed in court,
detail by detail,
death-bone witness by death-bone witness,
and I was shamed at the verdict
and given a cut penny
and the entrails of a cat.
But nevertheless I went on
to the invisible priests,
confessing, confessing
through the wire of hell
and they wet upon me in that phone booth.

Then I accosted winos,
and derelicts of the region,
winning them over into the latrine of my details.
Yes. It was a compulsion
but I denied it, called it fiction
and then the populace screamed *Me too, Me too*
and I swallowed it like my fate.

Now,
in my middle age,
I'm well aware
I keep making statues
of my acts, carving them with my sleep --
of if it is not my life I depict
then someone's close enough to wear my nose --
My nose, my patrician nose,
sniffing at me or following theirs down the street.

Yet even five centuries ago this smelled queer,
confession, confession,
and your devil was thought to push their eyes
and all the eyes had seen (too much! too much!).
It was proof that you were a needle
to push into their pupils.
And the only cure for such confessions overhead
was to sit in a cold bath for six days,
a bath full of leeches, drawing out your blood
into which confessors had heated the devil in them,

inhabit them with their madness.

It was wise, the medical men said,
wise to cry *Baa* and be smiling into your mongoloid hood,
while you simply tended the sheep.
Or else to sew your lips shut
and not let a word or a deadstone sneak out.

I too have my silence,
where I enter another room
and am not only blind,
but speech has flown out of me
and I call it dead
though the respiration be okay.
Perhaps it is a sheep call?
I feel I must learn to speak the *Baa*
of the simple-minded, while my mind
drives into the multi-colored,
crowded voices,
cries for help, *My breasts are off me.*
The transvestite whispering to me,
over and over, *My legs are disappearing*
My mother, her voice like water,
saying *Fish are cut out of me*
My father,
his voice thrown into a cigar,
A marble of blood rolls into my heart.
My great aunt,
her voice,
thrown into a lost child at the freak's circus,
I am the flame swallower
but turn me over in bed
and I am the fat lady.

Yes! While my mind plays simple-minded,
plays dead-woman in neon,
I must recall to say
Baa
to the black sheep I am.

Baa. Baa. Baa.

Appendix J

Passion of the Mad Rabbit

While the carrots sang arias into the holy earth
and the snowmen turned into bronze weathervanes,
I underwent a removal, tearing skin off me,
plucking out the eyes like Ping-Pong balls,
squashing the shriek of my heart like a phone off the hook--
and as these phenomenon occurred, a fool walked straight into
me.
He as named Mr. Rabbit. My own voice spoke to people,
anyone, friends, strangers on the street, saying.
"I am Mr. Rabbit." The flesh itself had become mad
and at three mirrors this was confirmed.

Next it was bad Friday and they nailed me up
like a scarecrow and many gathered eating popcorn, carrying
hymnals or balloons. There were three of us there,
though *they* appeared normal. My ears, so pink like powder,
were nailed. My paws, sweet as baby mittens, were nailed.
And my two fuzzy ankles. I said, "Pay no attention. I am
crazy."
But some giggled and some knelt. My oxygen became tiny
and blood rang over and over in my head like a bell.
The others died, the luck of it blurting through them.
I could not. I was a silly broken umbrella
and oblivion would not kiss me. For three days it
was thus.

Then they took me down and had a conference.
It is Easter, they said, and you are the Easter Bunny.
Then they built a great pyre of kindling and laid me on top
and just before the match they handed me a pink basket
of eggs the color of the circus.
Fire lit, I tossed the eggs to them, *Hallelujah* I sang
to the eggs,
singing as I burned to nothing in the tremor of the flames.
My blood came to a boil as I looked down the throat of
madness,
but singing yellow egg, blue egg, pink egg, red egg, green
egg.
Hallelujah, to each hard-boiled-colored egg.

In place of the Lord.
I whispered,
a fool has risen.

Appendix K

For John Who Begs Me Not to Inquire Further

Not that it was beautiful,
but that, in the end, there was
a certain sense of order there;
something worth learning
in that narrow diary of my mind
in the commonplaces of the asylum
where the cracked mirror
or my own selfish death
outstared me.
And if I tried
to give you something else,
something outside myself,
you would not know
that the worst anyone
can be, finally,
an accident of hope.
I tapped my own head;
it was glass, an inverted bowl.
At first it was private.
Then it was more than myself;
it was you, or your house
or your kitchen.
And if you turn away
because there is no lesson here
I will hold my awkward bowl,
with all its cracked stars shining
like a complicated lie,
and fasten a new skin around it
as if I were dressing an orange
or as strange sun.
Not that it was beautiful,
but that I found some order there.
There ought to be something special
for someone
in this kind of hope.
This is something I would never find
in a lovelier place, my dear,
although your fear is anyone's fear,
like an invisible veil between us all...
and sometimes in private,

my kitchen, your kitchen,
my face, your face.

Appendix G

Frenzy

I am not lazy.
I am on the amphetamine of the soul.
I am, each day,
typing out the God
my typewriter believes in.
Very quick. Very intense,
like a wolf at alive heart.
Not lazy.
When a lazy man, they say,
looks toward heaven,
the angels close the windows.

Oh angels,
keep the windows open
so hat I may reach in
and steal each object,
objects that tell me the sea is not dying,
objects that tell me the dirt has a life-wish,
that the Christ who walked for me,
walked on true ground
and that this frenzy,
like bees stinging the heart all morning,
will keep the angels
with their windows open,
wide as an English bathtub.

Appendix M

The Red Dance

There was a girl
who danced in the city that night
that April 22nd,
all along the Charles River.
It was as if one hundred men were watching
or do I mean one hundred eyes of God?
The yellow patches in the sycamores
glowed like miniature flashlights.
The shadows, the skin of them
were ice cubes that flashed
from the red dress to the roof.
Mile by mile along the Charles she danced
past the benches of lovers,
past he dogs pissing on the benches.
She had on red, red dress
and there was a small rain
and she lifted her face to it
and thought it part of the river.
And cars and trucks went by
on Memorial Drive.
And the Harvard students in the brick
hallowed houses studied Sappho in cement rooms.
And this Sappho danced on the grass
and danced and danced and danced.
It was death dance.
The Larz Anderson bridge wore its lights
and many cars went by,
and a few students strolling under
their Coop umbrellas.
And a black man who asked this Sappho the time,
the time, as if her watch spoke.
Words were turning into grease,
and she said, "Why do you lie to me?"
And the waters of the Charles were beautiful,
sticking out in many colored tongues
and this strange Sappho knew she would enter the lights
and be lit by them and sink into them.
And how the end would come --
it had been foretold to her --
she would aspirate swallowing a fish,
going down with God's first creature

dancing all the way.

Appendix N

Cigarettes and Whiskey and Wild, Wild Women

(from a song)

Perhaps I was born kneeling,
born coughing on the long winter,
born expecting the kiss of mercy,
born with a passion for quickness
and yet, as things progressed,
I learned early about the stockade
or taken out, the fume of the enema.
By two or three I learned not to kneel,
not to expect, to plant my fires underground
where none but the dolls, perfect and awful,
could be whispered to or laid down to die.

Now that I have written many words,
and let out so many loves, for so many,
and been altogether what I always was --
a woman of excess, of zeal and greed,
I find the effort useless,
Do I not look in the mirror,
these days,
and see a drunken rat avert her eyes?
Do I not feel the hunger so acutely
that I would rather die than look
into its face?

I kneel once more,
in case mercy should come
in the nick of time.

Appendix O

Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound

I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on
Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far
as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now
holding my wallet, my cigarettes
and my car keys
at 2 o'clock on a Tuesday
in August of 1960

Dearest,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened.
the sea is very old.
The sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage
or unusual hope,
grown rough and wrinkled
with incurable age.

Still,
I have eyes.
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver
that hangs by my knees;
the cement lifeboat that wears
its dirty canvas coat;
the faded sign that sits on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.

Over my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out

from under their habits,
as good as good babies who
have sunk into their carriages.
Without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts
of their arms.
Almost undressed,
I see what remains:
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
loosen from their leather boots
and their wooden chairs
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
out over this iron rail,
nodding their pink heads to one side,
flying four abreast
in the old-fashioned side stroke;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing without sound.

Dearest,
see how my dark girls sally forth,
over the passing lighthouse of Plum Gut,
its shell as rusty
as a camp dish,
as fragile as a pagoda
on a stone;
out over the little lighthouse
that warns me of drowning winds
that rub over its blind bottom
and its blue cover;
winds that will take the toes
and ears of the rider
or the lover.

There go my dark girls,

their dresses puff
in the leeward air.
Oh, they are lighter than flying dogs
or the breath of dolphins;
each mouth opens gratefully,
wider than a milk cup.
My dark girls sing for this.
They are going up.
See them rise
on black wings, drinking
the sky, without smiles
or hands
or shoes.
They call back to us
from the gauzy edge of paradise,
good news, good news.

Appendix P

Leaves that Talk

Yes.
It's May 20th and the leaves
green, green, wearing their masks
and speaking, calling out their Sapphic loves,
are here -- here -- here
calling out their death wish:

"Anne, Anne, come to us."
to die of course. Come when listening
to the voices of the doves
that burst in them and out of them.
I mean their veins, their hearts
who scare you and beguile you
and their woman apron lives,
their doves' arms flapping
from their cages, their brown stick branches.

I told someone once how they called to me,
sang to me, and that someone fled.
Now I will tell a priest
or is it a priestess?
Both, on and all and the same.
They call, though I sit here
sensibly behind my window screen.
They call, even if I'm pinned behind bars.
They call, they call their green death call.
They want me. They need me.
I belong lying down under them,
letting the green coffin fold and unfold
above me as I go out.

I flee. I flee.
I block my ears and eat salami.
I turn on THE song of THE LADY
but the leaves' song crawls through
and into it and mixes like a dream in a dream.
I confess. I confess.
They steam all summer,
calling dark and light and moonstone
and they do not shut up.
They do not.

It is bad for me, dear confessor,
and yet I am in love with it.
It has a body.
It has many bodies.
I do not believe in ghosts
(very much)
but I wonder if they aren't my whole past --
the generation of women, down the line,
the genealogical line right to the *Mayflower*,
and William Brewster and his woman
who rolled herself sick unto death
until she reached this promised land.
Oh well -- whoever my green girls are --
they *are*.

I dream its the fourth of July
and I'm having a love affair
with grandfather (his real birthday)
and that the leaves fall off,
clank, clank
crashing down like stones, New England
stones, one by one,
and in my dream
grandfather touches my neck and breast
and says, "Do not be afraid!
It's only the leaves falling!"
There are one hundred thousand woman cries,
tree by tree, and I scream out in my fear
that my green ladies are leaving,
my lovely obsessions,
and I need them.
I sob.
I wake up.
Kleenex.
Grandfather.

And, dear God
I am Rip van Winkle
It is six a.m.
July 5th,, 1974
and the branches are bare.
The leaves lie in green mounds,
like fake green snow huts.
And from the window as I peer out,

I see they have left their cages forever --
those wiry, spidery branches --
for me to people
someday soon when I turn green
and faithless to the summer.

Appendix Q

The Consecrating Mother

I stand before the sea
and it rolls and rolls in its green blood
saying, "Do not give up one god
for I have a handful."
The trade winds blew
in their twelve-fingered reversal
and I simply stood on the beach
while the ocean made a cross of salt
and hung up its drowned
and they cried *Deo Deo.*
The ocean offered them up in the vein of its might.
I wanted to share this
but I stood alone like a pink scarecrow.
The ocean steamed in and out,
the ocean gasped upon the shore
but I could not define her,
I could not name her mood, her locked-up faces.
Far off she rolled and rolled
like a woman in labor
and I thought of those who had crossed her,
in antiquity, in nautical trade, in slavery, in war.
I wondered how she had borne those bulwarks.
She should be entered skin to skin,
and put on like one's first and last cloth,
entered like kneeling your way into church,
descending into that ascension,
though he be slick as olive oil,
as she climbs each wave like an embezzler of white.
The big deep knows the law as it wears its gray hat,
though the ocean comes in its destiny,
with its one hundred lips,
and in moonlight she comes in her nudity,
flashing breasts made of milk water,
flashing buttocks made of unkillable lust,
and at night when you enter her
you shine like a neon soprano.

I am that clumsy human
on the shore
loving you, coming, coming,
going,

and wish to put my thumb on you
like The Song of Solomon.

Appendix R

The Civil War

I am torn in two
but I will conquer myself.
I will dig up the pride.
I will take scissors
and cut out the beggar.
I will take a crowbar
and pry out the broken
pieces of God in me.
Just like a jigsaw puzzle,
I will put Him together again
with the patience of a chess player.

How many pieces?
It feels like thousands,
God dressed up like a whore
in a slime of green algae.
God dressed up like an old man
staggering out of His shoes.
God dressed up like a child,
all naked,
even without skin,
soft as an avocado when you peel it
And others, others, others.

But I will conquer them all
and build a whole nation of God
in me -- but united,
build a new soul,
dress it with skin
and then put on my shirt
and sing an anthem,
a song of myself.

Appendix S

Manuscript: Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound

Please find attached the 36-page manuscript of *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound.* (Manuscript obtained from the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin)

4
1 a Prayer for nuns

Letter Written On the Long Island Ferry

(Dearest ~~[illegible]~~ you)
My car & I are neatly parked aboard
the good ship ORIENT, that rocks us, [illegible]
~~but~~ ~~float~~ waltz toward you,
splatted by the blue sea,
riding toward you ~~across~~ the blue stomach
of this blue sheet.
Now I am going back ~~[illegible]~~
d I have ripped my hand
from your hand,
as I said I would
and I have made it this far as I said I would
& I am on the top deck now, at 2:00 o'clock
on August 2nd in 1960.
Oh, forget about that.
These are my eyes!
the large letters, spelling ORIENT,
on the life preserver at my feet;
~~a~~ the cement life boat with its cushion,
its emblem faded saying Keep Off.
Oh, right, I say, I'll find some words
to sauce myself.
& as ~~I listen~~ over ~~my~~ right shoulder
I see 4 nuns ~~sitting~~ smiling like a bridge club chatting,
~~closing~~ ~~under their hoods~~
their faces poked out from under their hoods.

as good smaller

~~these~~ the god babies ~~[illegible]~~ happily in
their ~~[illegible]~~ ~~[illegible]~~

new carriage

~~[illegible]~~,

~~like the~~ the ~~buttons of children~~,

& I watch how they wear

~~they that~~ can wear ~~[illegible]~~ their deep clothes,
that the counts and counters; wind, & disguise faith to come to come
(the covers, the covers.)
as now it ~~perhaps (…)~~ ~~[illegible]~~ shame in,
and I see that umbrella/d that chair,
& the dark cloth spring suddenly square
from its post like the American ~~flag~~
or, now, far like ~~a sail~~ the [illegible] & sail
a ~~sea~~! out from their unknown fields, ~~[illegible]~~
~~[illegible]~~ they hot wings ~~[illegible]~~ out caught from their shoulders
~~&~~ on the black ~~[illegible]~~, ~~& the~~ the black wings —

Oh God)

Although I am very sad,
please let these nuns rise over this
~~smooth~~ greasy ~~deck~~
~~see~~ let them loosen ~~in the~~ from their ~~[illegible]~~,
& their wooden chairs,
~~[illegible]~~ out (over) across the terrible sail,
nodding their pink heads
~~to me sidle, in the rain~~
all at once; to me sidle,

Jan 2

& as I turn, over my right shoulder,
I see, 4 nuns, who sit like a bridge club,
chatting to each other;
their faces poked out from under their ~~hood~~ habits
as ~~if~~ good as good babies who have ~~sunk~~
happily into their moving carriages.
~~And~~ ~~and~~ I watch their deep cloths,
that ~~[illegible]~~ ~~come~~ ~~[illegible]~~ seem to cling closely,
~~[illegible]~~
~~I watch the~~
~~swish~~
I see the wind suck up these veils ~~those~~ ~~[illegible]~~ them
without discrimination;
& I see suddenly ~~that~~ double & that again,
~~pushed~~ out on
& ~~I~~ see ~~the~~ each dark cloths ~~poking~~ of ~~[illegible]~~ square from to [illegible]
like the American flag in a picture
& now, fat, like the bowl of a saint
or ~~[illegible]~~ look! ~~[illegible]~~ I: WINGS! I see now: It's
out from their unknown bodies ~~[illegible]~~ over wings
wings caught from their ~~shoulders~~ blouse of their impressive
~~their hidden wings~~ hidden wings working,
as ~~the~~ black works, for ~~the~~ clear magic
(nouns)

were meant

Oh God, although I am very sad,
could you please let these nuns
loosen from their leather boots
& the sharp rungs of their wooden chairs,

6

to [illegible] [illegible] this [illegible] dish,
out across the [illegible] (awful) soil
nodding their pink breasts,
all at once, to our seats, saying a prayer
~~[illegible]~~ (under that ~~the sea must~~ lie
greater than glass) or harder, or a diamond,
or the eyes of all the small fish
~~looking up~~ who look up at me.)

and let the
god let the
them

Oh Dearest! you, I am not a brave
when I'm sad;
I hear my mouth ~~[illegible]~~ for you,
~~and yet I see those good ladies~~
~~fly out across the air~~
~~across these [illegible]~~, !

I am
[illegible]
was surprised
to see that [illegible] is
still going on.

So I [illegible]

~~I~~ ~~[illegible]~~ I

~~[illegible]~~ ~~[illegible]~~ save myself, my eyes, for my mouth!
~~that talks to you~~, so I can ~~tell~~ give you
~~[illegible]~~ good ladies go up
slipping, [illegible] passing [illegible]
of Palm but, [illegible] the changing winds [illegible]
~~to~~ take ~~the~~ [illegible] & the load, too

Up [illegible], a ~~[illegible]~~ house,
~~[illegible]~~ [illegible] a stone,
~~and [illegible]~~ [illegible] camp dish,
[illegible] ... [illegible] [illegible]

good
help

how the
[illegible]
[illegible]
[illegible]

7

Last 3 4/

204

Oh. goddamn, my heart, I'm
riding backward —
watch the land I've left
& yet, I see ~~the~~ wake runs out toward
your land, a color,
if you stopped time,
of marble,
deep with all ~~[illegible]~~
~~[illegible]~~ color of blue, the sea strange mixed
as if, ~~[illegible]~~ the face of
Mary,
grown old & rough with age.
Or is it too sad, too look or dreaming at this?
Oh Damn you;
hear my eyes!
— I love you !
later, ~~[illegible]~~ ~~[illegible]~~ see the swans
~~rise~~ flap across out into the line of stars
the blue air, over the ~~a flue~~ blue sheet
~~[illegible]~~,
speaking happily to the faces
who stay below —

as if there were a praying
as if they were.

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY

Dearest you,
I am sotsurprisedhen Seem sad
that the ocean is still going on.
My car and I are neatly packed aboard
the big ship Orient that rode us both
toward you last week, splattered by the blue sun-s,
riding toward you over the blue stones
of this blue street.

Now I am going back

Dearest you,

When I reached the whaff I was surprised
to see the ocean still going on.

Dearest you,
was
When I drove away, my mouth clooged with tears
and your last touch curled against my cheek,
remembering the night I ran toward death

Dearest you,
When I drove away from your face,
my mouth was clogged with tears
and your last touch curled on my cheek,
prayingnto the road

~~my heart smashed~~

~~my [illegible]~~

my

my heart ~~[illegible]~~ ~~pinned~~ that ~~rode~~
~~splintering~~
+ my heart ~~[illegible]~~ across
against the splinters
~~on my chest~~ of my ribs
~~chest~~

Dearest you,
I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still
going on.
My car and I
are neatly backed aboard
the fat ship Orient, that rode
thatorode us both toward
you last month,
spattered by the blue sun,
riding toward you, ~~[illegible]~~ swaying
bearing forward
over the blue stones
of this blue street.

13 - 14

Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand
as I said I would
and I have made it this far,
as I said I would,
and I am on the top deck ~~now~~
now at 2:00 o'clock ~~[illegible]~~ ~~[illegible]~~ ~~[illegible]~~ holding my car keys
on a tuesday in Aggust
in 1960.

10.

Dearest you,
Outside the distortions
of my head, I/~~see~~/ watch listen
the drowned wood of the wark,
the bad rhythm of ~~its water~~ of its oily water
and up over the guazy sun — ~~[illegible]~~
the sky is without gulls
or humor.

Smaller tumor

[illegible]

10?

~~[illegible]~~
the sea smells
[illegible], in
[illegible],
~~[illegible]~~ its disease,
its tumor

8

These are my eyes:
the orange letters that
spell ORIENT on the life-
preserver that hangs by ~~my~~ knees;
at my side, the cement life
boat that wears a canvas coat
with a faded sign ~~that says~~ [illegible]
KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.

Sipping a cardboard cup
of [illegible] tea

10

Over my right shoulder
I find four nuns
who sit like a bridg club;
their faces poked out from under
their habits, as good
as good babies who
have sunk down into
their ~~w[illegible]~~ carragies.
I watch their deep clothes.
flutter out.
Oh dearest you, ~~that~~ [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]
a [illegible], what good are clothes.
A dark cloth goes
O [illegible] the [illegible] are [illegible].

10

square, out from its post,
and the wind without discrimination
pulls the skirts of their arms
like wings,
wings at the blouse
of each black shoulder.
~~their//~~ ~~[illegible]~~
and I see, suddenly,
~~[illegible]~~
that ankle
that chain.

that the [illegible]
that lady [illegible]
God [illegible]
that [illegible]

11 - 5

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns loosen
from their leather boots,
loosen from their wooden chairs,
to rise
over this greasy deck,
over the metal rail,
nodding their four pink heads
all at once to one side,
their right arm straight
and then bending
as in the side stroke,
their mouths round
breathing together,
~~singing~~ ahmen. like fish
singing under sand

[illegible]
living on their sweat
~~[illegible]~~
hips n loins

18

Then,
let the sea
be greater than grass,
or floating lumber,
or ~~opening~~ of my man's mouth;
~~or~~ greater, than the eyes
of all the terrible fish
who wait for me.

9

Dearest you,
I will save myself
to tell you how my dark girls
~~dark girls~~ go up,
over the passing Light House
of Plum Gut, its shell
as rusty as a camp dish,
as fragile as a pagoda
on a stone.
There go my dark girls,
over the ~~Light~~ house
that warns me of drowning winds
that will take the toes
and the ears of the rider
and the lover.

9
15

that angel [illegible] for [illegible],
untended [illegible] the [illegible] & [illegible]
+ the blue [illegible]

~~Their plums are [illegible]~~
from their beds

Their plumes
are hanging and swinging
from their beds,
lighter than flying dogs
or dolphins,
~~their~~ fed mouths open~~ing~~ ~~gracefully~~ gratefully
~~for~~ something ~~to sing~~.
they sing something wider than a [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]
to be [illegible] [illegible] are going up.

7

B.S.

I cannot sing ~~about love~~.
I'm riding backwards,
watching the land I've left
as the long angry wake
of my boat connects us;
the color,
if you stopped time,
of marble, ~~its veins still~~
Oh dearest you,
see my four dark girls
rise over this ~~and drop~~
~~over the edge of the sea~~

10

each one drinking the sky
[illegible] smiles,
or shows
black wings [illegible]
calling & ~~[illegible]~~ boats
to, good news, good news.

rise ~~over~~ the blue sun,
over the blue stones
of my blue street
& ~~and drop~~ slip over the edge.
~~of my vision~~.

Oh, dearest you,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened
~~to the sea~~
The ocean is still going on
and my four dark girls
can not hear me rage.
~~and rage~~.
Nothing has happened
The sea is ~~old~~ very old.
The sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or hope,
grown rough and ~~wrinkled~~ shriveled
with age.
Sick

rage
final

12

Dear you [illegible] love
[illegible] a love [illegible]

32

There go my dark girls,
their plumes hanging
from their beds.
Oh, they are lighter than flying dogs
or the breath of dolphins.
Each ~~Their~~ mouth~~s~~ opens gratefully,
wider than a milk cup.
My dark girls sing for this.
They are going up.

But I cannot sing.
I am riding backwards,
watching the land I've left,
watching the ragged wake
that connects us
while these four nuns rise
on black wings, drinking
the sky, without smiles,
or hands or shoes.
They call back from the guazy edge
of phradisezon,
Good news. Good news.

Dearest you,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened.
The ocean is still going on
despite ~~my four dark girls.~~ everything.
The sea is very old.
Dearest you,
the sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage
or unusual hope,
grown rough and wrinkled
with her terrible age.

There go my dark girls
their plumes swinging
like loose threads
from a ~~great~~ bobbin,

There go my dark girls
their plumes swinging
from their hard beds;
their plumes swinging
like loose threads
from a large bobbin;
their wings looser than
feathers torn from/~~the~~/
the down that flows
out of a milk wedds pod

shells

Stern

[illegible]

There go my dark girls,
their plumes swinging
from their hard beds,
like the soft down the sweeps
out of a milk weed's pod,

high button
large buttoned boots
loosen from their ~~leather/boots~~
to ride out
over this greasy deck,
steering out over this iron rail, its
ch t~~heir~~/skirt~~s~~ sticked over ~~their feet~~/ legs
~~like/largeglossy/tail/fings~~, like a glossy fan,
let them ride/~~out/into/the/east~~/
flying four abreast,
in the old fashioned side stroke;
each motth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing
without sound.

shadows ar
lavender

France
their soiled
traveling

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
loosen from their

(1)

Dearest you,
I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
My car and I
are neatly packed aboard
the good ship Orient
that rode us both toward
you last month,
splattered by the blue sun,
riding toward you
on this same ~~wooden~~ steel seat,
~~over the blue~~ stones (ROCKS)
of this blue street.

Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand
as I said I would
and I have made it this far,
as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now,
holding my wallet and my car keys
~~and it is~~ 2:00 o'clock on
a tuesday in August
of 1960.

Dearest you,
Outside the distortions
of my over anyalized head
I try to listen
to the drowned wood of the warf,
the bad rhythmn of its oily water
where it swells morbidly like a tumor
~~in~~ thick bubles, ~~its disease~~
~~and/it/tumor~~
and ~~its~~ a sym~~ptomatic~~ tumor.
Over me I hear the sun hiss
and the sky is without gulls
or humor.

These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver
that hangs by its knees.
At my side
the cement life boat wears
its canvas coat.
A faded sign sits on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.

14

11 (lines)

12 (more)

11

28

Over my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out frum under
their habits, as good
as those good babies who
have sunk down
into their carragies.
I watch their deep clothes
flutter and suck out.
Oh Dearest you,
think of goats, or mice
or lobster--- what good
are clothes? ~~[illegible]~~
Only the naked are devout.
I watch their deep clothes
~~and~~ dark cloth goes square,
out from its post.
[illegible] ~~The wind has no~~ discrimination
pulling the skirts
of their arms (like wings;)
wings at the blouse
of each black shoulder.
~~I see~~, suddenly, ~~[illegible]~~
~~that~~ ~~the bone will~~ remains
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

Oh God,
although I am very sad
could you please let
these four nuns loosen
from their leather boots,
loosen from their wooden chairs,
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
over this iron rail,
nodding their four pink heads
all at once to one side,
their arms stroking the sky,
~~all~~ doing the side stroke ~~together~~,
their mouths round,
breathing together,
like fish, singing without sound.

Then,
let the sea
be greater than grass,
or packed field of floating lumber,
or greater than the place of
my man's ~~close~~ mouth,
the let the sea
be greater than the eyes
of all the terrible fish who
wait for me.

31

Dearest you,
I will save myself
to tell you how my dark girls
have flown up over
the passing light house of Plum Gut,
its old shell as rusty
as a camp dish,
as fragile as a pagoda
on a stone, [illegible]
Th~~ere go my~~ dark ~~girl~~s
o~~ver~~ the little light house
that warns me of drowning winds,
winds that pul~~ling~~ each other like muscle,
~~pushing~~ over the blind rocks
and their sweet blue cover; ~~pulling over the~~ the plain blue cover.
winds ~~that~~ ~~will~~ take the toes
and the ears of the rider
and the lover.

that pull

There go my dark girls,
their plumes hanging [illegible]
~~and swinging/~~ [illegible]
from their beds.
They are lighter than flying dogs
or breath~~ing~~ dolphins
~~and each moth~~s opens gratefully
wider than a milk cup,
wings and mouth ~~[illegible]~~ing in unison.
My dark girls are going up. sing for this,
they are going up.

But I cannot sing.
I'm riding backwareds,
watching again,
the land I've left
as the long ragged wake
of my boat connects us;
the color,
if you stopped time,
of marble. ~~Or~~ see,
dear~~est~~, dearest,
my four dark girls rise
on black wings, drinking
the sky, without smiles, [illegible]
or hands or shoes.
calling back from the edge
[illegible], good [illegible]

of marble. Or see, dearest you
~~Dearest you~~, how my four dark girls
rise into the blue sun,
over the blue stones
of my blue street;
they rise on black wings,
drinking the sky
without smiles, or hands
or hehoes,

33

Dearest you,
although everything has happened,
~~I suppose~~ nothing has happened.
The ocean is still going on
and my four dark girls have gone
~~would not really bother with my~~ talk.
The sea is very old.
~~Nothing has happened.~~
Dearest you,
the sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage
or unusual hope,
grown rough~~t~~ and ~~shrivled~~ wrinkled ugly
w~~ith her age~~.
with her terrible age.
~~ugly~~

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE FERRY

Dearest you,
I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
My car and I
are neatly packed ~~////~~ aboard
the good ship Orient
that rode us both toward
you last month,
splattered by the blue sun,
sitting on this same hard seat,
riding toward you over the blue stones
of this blue street.

Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far
as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now
holding my wallet, my cigarettes
and my car keys
at 2:00 o'clock on Tuesday
in ~~this~~ August of 1960.

Dearest you,
outside the distortions
of my over analyzed head
I listen
to the drowned wood of the wharf,
the bad rhythm of its oily water
where it swells morbidly,
a thick bubble,
like a tumor.
Over me I hear the sun hiss
and the sky is without gulls
or humor.

Dearest you,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened.
The sea is very old.
The sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage
or unusual hope,
grown rough and wrinkled
with her terrible age.

Still, I have eyes.
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver
that hangs by its knees;
the cement life boat that wears
its dirty canvas coat;

the faded sign that sits on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.

Over my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out
from under their habits,
as good as good babies who
have sunk into their carriages.
I watch thier deep clothes
as one dark cloth goes square,
out from its post.
Without discrimination
the wind pull the skirts
of their arms
like wings;
wings at the blouse
of each dark shoulder.
Almost undressed,
I see what remains:
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
loosen from their leather boots
and their wooden chairs
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
out over this iron rail,
nodding their ~~[illegible]~~ pink heads to one side;
flying four abreast
in the old fashioned side stroke;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing
without sound.

Then,
let the sea be greater than grass,
or a floating jam of cut lumber,
(or the hot angel in my man's mouth. —) cut
Oh God, let the sea
be greater than the eyes
of all the (terrible) fish
who wait for me.

Dearest you,
see how my dark girls fly out

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY

Dearest you,
I am surppised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
My car and I are neatly packed aboard
the fat ship Orient that rode us both
toward you last week, splattered by the blue sun,
riding toward you over the blue stones
of this blue street.
Now I am going back and I have
ripped my hand from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far, as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now at 2:00 o'clock
on/~~Agust~~ August the 2nd in 1960.
~~When I drove away from your mouth~~
~~my own was clogged with death.~~

~~Oh, forget about death!~~
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell ORIENT
on the life presever that hangs by my knees
and the cement life boat at my side
has its canvass coat on with a faded sign
that says KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say. I'll save myself.
I'll find words to save myself.

IN
~~Amid~~ the ~~distotions~~/ distortions of my head,
I watch the drowned wood of the warf,
the bad rhythm of the water at the edge
and, over me, the sky is without gulls
or humor. I turn from scenery and over
my right shoulder I find four nuns
who sit there like a bridge club,
~~circle~~
~~stooped and chatting to each other,~~ together, ~~chatting in a circle~~
their faces poke out from under their habits
as good as good babies who have sunk down
~~to settle in~~/their ~~snug~~ carraiges.
I watch their deep clothes
flutter out in layers from their faces.
A dark cloth goes square, out from its post,
~~like~~

The argument -

21

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY

Dearest you,
I am surppised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
My car and I are neatly packed aboard
the fat ship Orient that rode us both
toward you last week, splattered by the blue sun,
riding toward you over the blue stones
of this blue street.
Now I am going back and I have
ripped my hand from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far, as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now at 2:00 o'clock
on/~~Augus~~ August the 2nd in 1960.
When I drove away from your mouth
my own was clogged with death.

Oh, forget about death!
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell ORIENT
on the life preserver that hangs by my knees
and the cement life boat at my side
has its canvass coat on with a faded sign
that says KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say. I'll save myself.
I'll find words to save myself.

Amid the ~~distortions~~/ distortions of my head,
I watch the drowned wood of the wark,
the bad rhythm of the water at the edge
and, over me, the sky is without gulls
or humor. I turn from scenery and over
my right shoulder I find four nuns
who sit there like a bridge club,
circle
stooped ~~and chatting to each other,~~ together, chatting in a ~~circl~~
~~their~~ faces poke out from under their habits
as good as good babies who have sunk down
to settle in their snug carraiges.
I watch their deep clothes
flutter out in layers from their faces.
A dark cloth goes square, out from its post,
~~like~~

①

Dearest you,
I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
My car and I are neatly packed aboard
thesfsquare ferry that rode us both
toward you last week, spattered by the blue sun,
riding toward you over the blue stones
of this blue street.
Now I am going back and I have
ripped my hand from your hand and I said I would
and I have made it this far, as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now at 2:00 o'clock
on August the 8th in 1960.

These are my eyes;
the orange letters that spell ORIENT
on the life preserver that hangs by my knees,
and at my side, the cement life boat
wears it canvas coat with the faded sign
that says KEEP OFFZ
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.
I'll write to you
to save myself.

Beyond the distortions of my head,
I see the drowned wood of the warf,
the bad rhythm of the water at the edge,
and over me, the sky is without gulls
or humor.

17

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY

Dearest you,
I am not a home when I'm sad
and I'm so surprised to see that the ocean
is still going on.
My car and I are neatly packed aboard
the big ship Orient that rode us both
toward you last week, splatterd by the blue sun,
riding toward you over the blue stones
of this blue street.
Now I am going back and I have ripped my hand
from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far, as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now
at 2:00 o'clock on Agust 2nd in 1960.

Oh, forget about love!
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell ORIENT
on the life preserver that hands by my knees
and the cement life boat, at my side,
with its coat on and its faded emblem saying
KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say, I'll save myself.
I~~'ll write~~ ~~words to save myself.~~
I save myself by writing a poem.

STooped
As I turn, I see, over my right shoulder,
four nuns, who sit like a bridge club,
chatting to each other in a circle;
their faces poked out from under their habits,
as good as good babies who have sunk
happily

We're going
to give each other
a little [illegible]
[illegible] to [illegible]
J.D. [illegible] Wright

25

By my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out
from under their habits, as good as
good babies who have sunk in their carriages.
I watch their deep clothes
as one dark cloth goes/~~[illegible]~~/ square,
out from its post.
Without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts
of their arms
like wings;
wings at the blue
of each dark shoulder.
Almost undressed,
I see what remains:
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
loosen from their leather boots,
loosen from the rungs of their wooden chairs,
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
out over this iron rail,
nodding their four pink heads
all at once, to one side;
four abreast, their arms stroking the sky
in the old fashioned side stroke;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
like fish do,
singing without sound.

Then,
let the sea
be greater than grass,
or a floating jam of cut lumber,
or greater than

out from its post.
Without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts
of their arms,
like wings;
wings at the blouse
of each dark shoulder.
Almost undressed,
I see what ~~will~~ remains
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please let
these four nuns
loosen from their leather boots,
loosen from the rungs of their wooden chairs,
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
over this iron rail,
nodding their four pink heads
~~all at once~~, to one side,
four abreast
~~their arms stroking the sky,~~
in the
~~swimming~~ the old fashioned side storke,
each
~~their~~ mouth open~~ing to each other~~ and ~~as~~ round,
~~they~~ breath~~ing~~ together
like fish, do
singing ~~without~~ ~~a~~ sound.

Then,
let the sea
be greater than grass,
or a packed field of floated lumber,
or greater than lips of my man's mouth;
then let the sea
be greater than the eyes
of all the terrible fish
who wait for me.

Dearest you,
I will save myself
to tell you how my dark girls
have gone over the passing light house
of Plum Gut, its shell as rusty
as a camp dish,
its ~~shell~~ as fragile as a pagoda
on a stone;
they go over ~~the little~~ light ~~house~~
that warns me of drowning winds,
that rub over ~~the~~ its blind ~~stone~~ bottom
and ~~the same~~ its ~~blue~~ dover,
wind that will take the toes
and the ears of the rider
or the lover.

19

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
ea
loosen from their ~~huge~~ helather boots
to rise out glide
over this greasy desk,
steering out over this iron rail,
each skirt stitched ~~like a fan~~ over ~~their~~ stockings
~~like a glossy fan,~~
~~sallying forth~~
~~slapping their like an open fan~~
moving cautously like an open fan,
let them sally ~~forth~~ forth together,
flying ~~out~~ four abreast
in the old fashioned side stroke;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing
without sound.

no wings
with all
this flying –

Oh God,

although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
[illegible]
loosen from their leather boots

I am not imploring God to set them
loose, that is set them free
I am asking that be permitted
to loosen themselves –

the garment
on their arms
is as full as
a skirt –

I was unaware
a nun's life
[illegible]
[illegible] as
the family
a child.

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY

Dearest you,
My car and I are neatly packed aboard
the good ship Orient that rode us both
toward you last week, splattered by the blue sun,
riding toward you over the blue stones
of this blue street.
Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far, as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now,
at 2:00 o'clock on August 2nd, in 1960.

Oh forget about heart!
These are my eyes:
the orange letters spelling ORIENT
on the life presever at my feet,
the cement life boat, with its coat on,
its emblem faded, saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right! I say. I'll find words
to save myself.

As I turn, I see, over my right shoulder,
four nuns, who sit like a bridge club,
chatting to each other in a circle;
their faces poked out from under their habits,
as good as good babies who have sunk
happily into their [illegible] carragies.
I watch their deep clothes [illegible]
~~that were meant to cover, to cover~~ them closely,
flutter from their faces like hair
and I see ~~the~~ wind ~~suck up these~~ veils
without discrimintation
and I see, suddenly, under the fringe
that ankle and that chain,
I see each dark cloth go sharply square
from its post, like the American Flag in a picture;
or now, fat like the big bowl of a sail
or else they are wings, [illegible]
out from their unknown bodies I see wings,
wings caught at the blouse of ~~their~~ each shoulder,
wo~~rking as~~ the black works for the ~~dear~~ magic.

Oh God, although I am very sad,
could you please let these nuns
loosen from their leather boots
loosen from the sharp rungs of their wooden chairs,

to rise over this greasy deck
out across their iron rail,
nodding their four pink heads,
all at once, to one side,
their mouths round in a Ahmen
and let the sea under them be greater than grass,
or lumber or the ~~sound~~ of my man's dear mouth
and let ~~them~~ be greater than the eyes
of all the terrible fish who look up at me.

Oh dearest you,
I am not a home
when I'm sad
and I am so surprised to see that the ocean
is still going on ~~and so~~ I ~~must~~ save myself
~~to tell you how~~ these good ladies go up,
slippery, over the passing light house of Plum Gut
that warns me of drowning winds that take both
the ~~feet of the rider and even the hands of the lover~~s,
There go my dark ladies, siloutes over the light house,
that fragile pagoda on a stone, ~~as~~ rusty as a camp dish,
they sing to it of the ~~good~~ sleep.

I cannot sing about love.
Oh, god damn my heart, I'm riding backward~~s~~,
I watch the land I've left
andthe long wake of the good ship Orient connects us,
a color, if you stopped time, of marble,
or ~~looking at the quickly out,~~
the sea is the face of Mary,
grown old and rough~~t~~ with age,
~~as~~ my good ladies ~~go up,~~
~~as if there~~ were a prayer.

to rise over this greasy deck
~~out across~~ ~~their~~ iron rail,
nodding their four pink heads
all at once, to one side;
their mouths round in an ahmen.
Then let the sea be greater than grass,
~~or~~ lumber or ~~even~~ the opening of my man's mouth,
~~or~~ greater ~~than~~ the eyes of all the terrible fish
who ~~wink at me~~. wait for me.

Dearest you, I will save myself
to tell you ~~how~~ these good ladies ~~go~~ up,
[redacted], over the passing light house of Plum Gut
that warns me of drowning winds that will take
the toes and the ears of ~~boat~~ riders and lovers.
There go my dark girls,
silouted over the light house
that is as rusty as a camp dish,
this is a fragile pagoda on a stone.
There go my girls,
they sing ~~for of their glad~~ sleep.

I cannot sing about love.
~~or, god damn my heart,~~
I'm riding backwards.
I watch the land I've left
as the long wake of my boat connects us,
the color, if you stopped time, of marble,
or remembering that the whole ocean is still going on
while my ~~good~~ ladies ~~go up~~
over the blue air, the blue stones of my blue street,
as if there were a prayer.
~~I really know that~~ the sea is the face of Mary,
grown old and rough with age .

Nothing has happened.
Mary has grown old.

Oh dearest you
nothing

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY

I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far
as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now
holding my wallet, my cigarettes
and my car keys
at 2 o'clock on a tuesday
in August of 1960.

Dearest you,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened.
The sea is very old.
The sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage [illegible]
or unusual hope,
grown rough and wrinkled
with her uncurable age.

Tired &
moonless

Still,
I have eyes:
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver
that hangs by its knees;
the cement life boat that wears
its dirty canvas coat;
the faded sign that sifts on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.

Over my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out
from under their habits,
as good as good babies who
have sunk into their carriages.
Without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts
of their arms
like wings.
Almost undressed,
I see what remains:
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

mad
Man Made

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
loosen from their leather boots
and their wooden chairs
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
out over this iron rail,
nodding their pink heads to one side,
flying four abreast
in the old fashioned side stroke;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing
without sound.

more particular

Then,
let the sea
be greater than grass
or a floating jam of cut lumber.
Oh God, let the sea
be greater than the eyes
of all the terrible fish
who wait for me.

~~Oh dearest,~~ Oh Dearest, you
see how my dark girls fly out
over the passing light house of Plum Gut,
its shell as rusty nice
as a camp dish,
(as fragile as a pagoda)
(on a stone;
out over the little light house
that warns me of drowning winds
that rub over its blind bottom
and its blue cover;
winds that will take the toes
and the ears of the rider
or the lover.

not only but mine [illegible] nicely -

There go my dark girls, [illegible]
their plumes swinging
from their beds.
Oh, they are lighter than flying dogs
or the breath od dolphins;
each mouth opens gratefully,
wider than a milk cup.
My dark girls sing for this.
They are going up.

not sure of any of this [illegible]

I love
De~~arest,~~ I give you them to you
~~here are~~/ my four dark girls;
see them rise
on black wings, drinking
the sky, without smiles

15

or hands
or shoes.
They call back to us
from the gauzy edge of paradise,
good news, good news.

living
& [illegible]

94
3
282

k

Anne Sexton
40 Clearwater Rd.
Newton Lower Falls
Massachusetts

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY

I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far
as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now
holding my wallet, my cigarettes
and my car keys
at 2 o'clock on a tuesday
in August of 1960.

Dearest,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened.
The sea is very old.
The sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage
or unusual hope,
grown rough and wrinkled
with its incurable age.

Still,
I have eyes.
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver
that hangs by its knees;
the cement life boat that wears
its dirty canvas coat;
the faded sign that sits on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.

Over my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out
from under their habits,
as good as good babies who
have sunk into their carraiges.
Without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts
of their arms.
Almost undressed,
I see what remains:

that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
2) loosen from their leather boots
and their wooden chairs
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
out over this iron rail,
their skirts stitched over their feet
like an open fan,
nodding their pink heads to one side,
flying four abreast
in the old fashioned side stroke;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing without sound.

Dearest,
see how my dark girls sally forth,
over the passing light house of Plum Gut,
4 its shell as rusty
as a camp dish;
out over the little light house
5 the warns me of drowning winds
that rub over its blind bottom
and its blue cover;
winds that will take the toes
and the ears of the rider
or the lover.

There go my dark girls,
their plumes swinging
6) from their thick beds.
Oh, they are lighter than flying dogs
or the breath of dolphins;
each mouth opens gratefully,
wider than a milk cup.
My dark girls sing for this.
They are going up.

Here are my four dark girls:
see them rise
on black wings, drinking
the sky, without smiles
or hands
or shoes.
They call back to us
from the gauzy edge of paradise,
good news, good news.

24

~~Anne~~ Sexton
~~40 Clearwater~~ Rd.
Newton Lower Falls
Massachusetts

JUN 10 1961 232

MV 15

#6, on 27 picas

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY

5509

pt Verse type on 27 picas. Set line a line, no indent

I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far
as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now 5
holding my wallet, my cigarettes 5
and my car keys
at 2 o'clock on a tuesday
in August of 1960.

white line

Dearest,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened.
The sea is very old.
The sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage
or unusual hope,
grown rough and wrinkled
with incurable age.

white line

Still,
I have eyes.
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver 5
that hangs by my knees;
the cement lifeboat that wears 5
its dirty canvas coat;
the faded sign that sits on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.

11/11 1 pt Cap

white line

Over my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out
from under their habits,
as good as good babies who
have sunk into their carriages.
Without discrimination 5
the wind pulls the skirts
of their arms.
Almost undressed,
I see what remains:
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

white line

→

Oct [illegible]

Oh, God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
loosen from their leather boots
and their wooden chairs
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
out over this iron rail,
nodding their pink heads to one side,
flying four abreast
in the old fashioned side stroke;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing without sound.

5509

white line

Dearest,
see how my dark girls sally forth,
over the passing light house of Plum Gut,
its shell as rusty
as a camp dish,
as fragile as a pagoda
on a stone;
out over the little light house
that warns me of drowning winds
that rub over its blind bottom
and its blue cover;
winds that will take the toes
and the ears of the rider
or the lover.

white line

There go my dark girls,
their dresses puff
in the leeward air.
Oh, they are lighter than flying dogs
or the breath of dolphins;
each mouth opens gratefully,
wider than a milk cup.
My dark girls sing for this.
They are going up.

white line

Here are my four dark girls:
see them rise
on black wings, drinking
the sky, without smiles
or hands
or shoes.
They call back to us
from the gauzy edge of paradise,
good news, good news.

Itals

11-please on separate line; flush right with longest line

Anne Sexton

#

~~A FAREWELL LETTER, WRITTEN~~ ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY (I love you.)

Dearest you,
I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far
as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now
holding my wallet, my cigarettes
and my car keys
at 2 o'clock on a tuesday
in August of 1960.

[illegible] in the grand style!

Dearest you,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened.
The sea is very old.
The sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage
or unusual hope,
grown rough and wrinkled
with her incurable age.

Still,
I have eyes.
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver
that hangs by its knees;
the cement life boat that wears
its dirty canvas coat;
the faded sign that sits on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.

Over my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out
from under their habits,
as good and good babies who
have sunk into their carriages.
Without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts
of their arms,
like wings.
Almost undressed,
I see what remains:
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

[illegible] !

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
loosen from their leather boots

the undressing
is possible
embarrassment is
[illegible] love-[illegible]
[illegible] 9

and their wooden chairs
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
out over this iron rail,
nodding their pink heads to one side,
flying four abreast
in the old fashioned side stroke;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing
without sound.

Don't tell me you don't
have a sensitive ear.
This sort of passage sings
unmistakably.

Then,
let the sea
be greater than grass
or a floating jam of cut lumber.
Oh God, let the sea
be greater than the eyes
of all the terrible fish
who wait for me.

Dearest you,
see how my dark girls fly out
over the passing light house of Plum Gut,
its shell as rusty
as a camp dish,
as fragile as a pagoda
on a stone;
out over the little light house
that warns me of drowning winds
that rub over its blind bottom
and its blue cover;
winds that will take the toes
and the ears of the rider
or the lover.

There go my dark girls,
their plumes swinging
from their beds.
Oh, they are lighter than flying dogs ?
or the breath of dolphins;
each mouth opens gracefully,
wider than a milk cup.
My dark girls sing for this.
They are going up.

Dearest you,
here are my four dark girls:
see them rise
on black wings, drinking
the sky, without smiles
or hands
or shoes.
They call back to us
from the gauzy edge of paradise,
Good news, good news.

to this? It
a little forced. ←

Anne Sexton ~~Augst~~/ August 1960

But your very last line suggests a faltering [illegible] — as though [illegible] — in the midst of [illegible] — at the last minute [illegible] the lone ranger [illegible] magnificent [illegible]

[illegible] at the end by dealing with the miraculous in the same concrete [illegible] descriptions of commonplaces [illegible] in this poem by the music [illegible] as you had [illegible]

10

Appendix T

Jesus Walking

When Jesus walked into the wilderness
he carried a man on his back,
at least it had the form of a man,
a fisherman perhaps with a wet nose,
a baker perhaps with flour in his eyes.
The man was dead it seems
and yet he was unkillable.
Jesus carried many men
yet there was only one man --
if indeed it was a man.
There in the wilderness all the leaves
reached out their hands
but Jesus went on by.
The bees beckoned him their honey
but Jesus went on by.
The boar cut out its heart and offered it
but Jesus went on by
with his heavy burden.
The devil approached and slapped him on the jaw
and Jesus walked on.
The devil made the earth move like an elevator
and Jesus walked on.
The devil built a city of whores,
each in little angel beds,
and Jesus walked on with his burden.
For forty days, for forty nights
Jesus put one foot in front of the other
and the man he carried,
if it was a man,
became heavier and heavier.
He was carrying all the trees of the world
which are one tree.
He was carrying all the boots
of all the men in the world
which are one boot.
He was carrying our blood.
One blood.

To pray, Jesus knew,
is to be a man carrying a man.

Appendix U

Gull

You with your wings like spatulas,
letting the blue turn into sugar kisses,
letting the fog slip through your fingertips,
informing the lighthouse like turning on the oven,
sobbing at the fish over the Atlantic,
crying out like young girls in fevers an chills,
crying out like friends who sing from the tavern
of fighting hands, crying out, like a goat with
its mouth full of pearls, snatching the bait
like blood from the coals. Oh Gull of my childhood,
cry over my window over and over, take me back,
oh harbors of oil and cunners, teach me to laugh
and cry again that way that was the good bargain
of youth, when the man following you was not a tail
but an uncle, when the death that came upon you
when you were thirsty was solved by a Coke,
but what can be done gull gull when you turn the sun
on again, a dead fruit
and all that flies today
is crooked and vain and has been cut from a book.

Appendix V

The Love Plant

A freak but moist flower
tangles my lungs, knits into my heart
crawls up my throat
and sucks like octopi on my tongue.
You planted it happily last summer
and I let it take root in my moon-hope,
not knowing it would come to crowd me out,
to explode inside me this March.
All winter trying to diminish it,
I felt it enlarge.
But of course never spoke to you of this,
for my sanity was awful enough,
and I felt compelled to think only of yours.
Now that you have gone for always
why does not the plant shrivel up?
I try to force it away.
I swallow stones
Three times I swallow slender vials
with crossbones on them.
But it thrives on their liquid solution.
I light matches and put them in my mouth,
and my teeth melt but the greenery hisses on.
I drink blood from my wrists
and the green slips out like a bracelet.
Couldn't one of my keepers get a lawn mower
and chop it down if I turned inside out for an hour?
This flower, this pulp, the hay stuff
has got me, got me.
Apparently both of us are unkillable.

I am coughing. I am gagging. I feel it enter
the nasal passages, the sinus, lower, upper
and thus to the brain -- spurting out of my eyes
I must find a surgeon who will cut it out, burn it out
as they do sometimes with violent epileptics.
I will dial one quickly before I erupt!

Would you guess at it
if you looked at me swinging down Comm. Ave.
in my long black coat with its fur hood,
and my long pink skirt poking out step by step?

That under the coat, the pin, the bra, the pants,
in the recesses where love knelt
a coughing plant is smothering me?

Perhaps I am becoming unhuman
and should accept its natural order?
Perhaps I am becoming part of the green world
and maybe a rose will just pop out of my mouth?
Oh passerby, let me bite it off and spit it at you
so you can say "How nice!" and nod your thanks
and walk three blocks to your lady love
and she will stick it behind her ear
not knowing it will crawl into her ear, her brain
and drive her mad.

Then she will be like me --
a pink doll with her frantic green stuffing.

Appendix W

What has it come to, Dr. Y.
my needing you?
I work days,
stuffed into a pine-paneled box.
You work days
with your air conditioner gasping
like a tube-fed woman.
I move my thin legs into your office
and we work over the cadaver of my soul.
We make a stage set out of my past
and stuff painted puppets into it.
We make a bridge toward my future
and I cry to you: I will be steel!
I will build a steel bridge over my need!
I will build a bomb shelter over my heart!
But my future is a secret.
It is as shy as a mole.

What has it come to
my needing you...
I am the irritating pearl
and you are the necessary shell.
You are the twelve faces of the Atlantic
and I am the rowboat. I am the burden.

How dependent, the fox asks?
Why so needy, the snake sings?
It's this way...
Time after time I fall down into the well
and you dig a tunnel in the dangerous sand,
you take the altar from a church and shore it up.
With your own white hands you dig me out.
You give me hoses so I can breathe.
You make me a skull to hold the worms
of my brains. You give me hot chocolate
although I am known to have no belly.
The trees are whores yet you place
me under them. The sun is poison
yet you toss me under it like a rose.
I am out of practice at living
You are as brave as a motorcycle.

What has it come to
that I should defy you?
I would be a copper wire
without electricity.
I would be a Beacon Hill dowager
without her hat.
I would be surgeon
who cut with his own nails.
I would be a glutton
who threw away his spoon.
I would be God
without Jesus to speak for me.

I would be Jesus
without a cross to prove me.

August 24, 1964

Appendix X

The Black Art

A woman who writes feels too much,
those trances and portents!
As if cycles and children and islands
weren't enough; as if mourners and gossips
and vegetables were never enough.
She thinks she can warn the stars.
A writer is essentially a spy.
Dear love, I am that girl.

A man who writes knows too much,
such spells and fetiches!
As if erections and congresses and products
weren't enough; as if machines and galleons
and wars were never enough.
With used furniture he makes a tree.
A writer is essentially a crook.
Dear love, you are that man.

Never loving ourselves,
hating even our shoes and our hats,
we love each other, precious, precious.
Our hands are light blue and gentle.
Our eyes are full of terrible confessions.
But when we marry,
the children leave in disgust.
There is too much food and no one left over
to eat up all the weird abundance.

At the same time, presence--at least as I am using it here to describe how Sexton finds her own self in her writing--is mediated. That is, Sexton can see herself, understand herself in so far as she can realize herself in words. In *Pain for a Daughter*, for example, Sexton's description of the mother-narrator brings her face to face with her estranged condition. She experiences her self as alien:

> ...to live but not to reach or to reach wrong.. believe me (can you?) what's wrong? I want to belong. I'm like a Jew who ends up in the wrong country. I'm not a part. I'm not a member. I'm frozen (L. Sexton, 1991, p.252).

Similarly, her description of the daughter also allows her to see herself. She, too, is a woman whose passions return her again and again to fear. Such that writing a letter back to a fan in 1974, she interjects in a nonsequitur, "but for some reason I am terribly afraid"[16] (L. Sexton, 1991, p. 398). To write *Pain for a Daughter* then is to attempt to set her *self* down in words. The presence that poetry offers is one that comes both in deciphering the meaning of the words, "the self is both made and explored in words" (Taylor, 1989, p.183) and the presence that is given in the sensual experience of reading poetry, in the sense that hovers just above the words, -- immediate, felt, untranslatable.

With this definition of presence, we can now explore how *Pain for a Daughter* allows Sexton to be present to herself, to join herself to herself. Allow for a moment, that in *Pain for a Daughter,* Sexton is able to discern her self in both the daughter and the mother. Consider then, what the writing of the poem permits. Sexton can recognize who she has been as a cohesive being: a daughter in pain, in loss, in love, in fear. Having unified her succession of (daughter) selves, Sexton can join her self to herself. That is, the daughter in fear converges and is made one and the same with the mother in fear. Amassing who she has been (a passionate girl) and amalgamating it with who she is (an estranged mother), Sexton renders for herself a subject. That is, by naming her experience and feeling it in all its immediacy, she finds herself capable of subjectivity. She makes a self who stands in accord with an internal time, wherein meaning orders events rather than chronology. This self, as Sexton depicts her, has not only weight and substance, that is to say history, but also interiority or depth.

---

[16] For those I would climb a rope ladder or even crawl on stage on hands and knees and as I said in my column, "read my God-damned heart out." Of course you don't come as executioners but for some reason I am terribly afraid, and I could go on about that in detail, but for those few who did come to hear my living voice I say, "God is holding me."

Conclusion

As exhibited in the poem the mother-narrator's self-presence is a "seeing" that changes time. Seeing of this order constitutes the very act of being "with". Through seeing the mother is with her daughter--in the present as she lives life's progression blind with love, loss, pain, fear--with the daughter in the moment of her self-exiling terror her "breath sucked in and arched against the pain, her eyes glancing off me where I stand at the door" and in the future with all the selves the daughter will be in childbirth and in death "and I saw her, at that moment, in her own death." Seeing then serves as a form of faithfulness to whom I have been and who I will be. Such a faith changes time whereby "I do not move through time, but time moves in upon me where I live" (Momaday, N.S., 1976).

Coextensive, then, with the meaning of words and all that is transgressive in love stands the music of the words and all that is possible in love. Lingering just above the daunting realization that the love she craves ravages is the echo of the line "and I knew that she knew." The beauty of the poetic, here, is that the same words that make explicit and inescapable a problematic understanding of love (that love is pain) are the words whose resonance, sensuality and music make manifest a protective and constitutive mother-love which is also Anne Sexton's self-presence.

In this context, Sexton's claim that poetry saves her becomes comprehensible. As poet she is capable of casting a world in which her perverse intimacies may exist side by side her devout ones. Mother-love can entail merging with the daughter, inhabiting the same word-space-body as the daughter ("and I knew that she knew") because the daughter is not only a daughter but also a self. Within the dreamlike truth of the poem, time and space do not exist, or they exist in another form such that there are no incongruities. Love can stand overdetermined, at once narcissistic and profound, selfish and compassionate, destructive and constitutive, damning and saving.. Within the realm of the poem, she can exist with all her irreconcilable differences. Within the poem's text, she can be as her favorite palindrome implies, both the rat and the star. To ask, as she does that this palindrome be inscribed on her tombstone, is to ask to be remembered for herself in her entirety: "Rats live on no evil stars."

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Anne Sexton: A Psychological Portrait

PAPER II

Death and the Writer

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compelling--even as she understood that one "does not look backward for an answer in an old poem?" (L. G. Sexton, & Ames, 1977, p.421). And what finally can these poems show us as we attempt to garner some understanding of Anne Sexton, her writing and her death?

Both poems, *The Truth the Dead Know* (1962) and *The Touch* (1969) valorize touch (see Appendixes F and G for complete poems). Both express the faith that touch can redeem, save, vivify, but they do so to different ends. Where *The Truth the Dead Know* uses writing to instantiate the body--to make the body to live, *The Touch* uses it to obviate the body--to make the body to die. In *The Truth the Dead Know* Sexton makes manifest a poetic power that renders her deeply and bodily present. So profound is her presence that she can touch even the dead. Conversely, in *The Touch*, she uses writing as a means of escaping embodiment. Sexton herself confesses as much to Dr. Martin Orne in 1956. Describing how she neglects her family, Sexton links writing with drinking and drugs: "Only time I am there is when I am thinking about poetry or writing--shuffling between methods of escape--liquor, pills, writing -- I don't have anything else"(Middlebrook, 1991, p.61). She seeks relief from the burden of being in a touch that offers all and nothing, contact and oblivion. To understand the Anne Sexton that these poems make manifest is to understand how writing served both to save and to kill her.

The Touch of Poetry

Dedicated to her mother and father who died within three months of each other *The Truth the Dead Know* (1962) has been described as an "anti-elegy." The poem presents a narrator who refuses to mourn and who repudiates her loss by vanquishing the dead:

> Gone I say and walk from church,
> refusing the stiff procession to the grave
> letting the dead ride alone in the hearse
> It is June. I am tired of being brave.

Determined to set herself apart from grief, the persona in the poem attempts to pre-empt the dead by abandoning them first, leaving them to "ride alone in the hearse." Setting off to the Cape with her lover, she is intent on living life not death, on "cultivating (her) self/ where the sun gutters from the sky."

And yet death is ever present infused in her consciousness such that all her living acts are edged with it. It is not only in the funeral procession she leaves behind, but also in the dead she cannot help but see as she stares out over the ocean:

> ...They (the dead) lie without shoes
> in their stone boats. They are more like stone
> than the sea would be if it stopped.

Death is in the thoughts that pass over her as she touches her lover:

> ...the sea swings in like an iron gate
> and we touch. In another country people die.

So near and all encompassing is death it is in the air itself. It is the stone-cold chill of the wind as it sweeps the sunbather's bodies:

> My darling, the wind falls in like
> stones from the whitehearted water
> and when we touch, we touch entirely
> no one's alone.

Stones in their closed impenetrability are Sexton's equivalent of death: the dead inhabit "stone" boats and are more like "stone" than the becalmed sea.

Situated in this place of ever-present death, the persona enters touch. It is in her consciousness of death that she is moved to act. And though the persona has fled death, though she has attempted to banish the dead, her attempt doubles back on her. The very step she has taken to deny the dead, returns the dead to her tenfold.

Her drive to the sea makes clear that she cannot shed her consciousness of the dead merely by turning from them. She cannot make herself through her living acts. She cannot excise the dead from her being by placing them at a geographic distance or even by countering their mortality with the living embrace of her lover. Ineluctably tied to the dead, her attempts to deny their hold on her only serve to reveal her boundedness. Immersed in her lover's embrace, far from the funeral scene, she still finds she can see nothing but the dead. So deeply is she connected to the dead that neither distance, nor passion can dim her awareness of them. And so she finds herself addressing the dead, albeit defiantly. She asks: "What of the dead?" What of the dead who abandon me, who confront me with my own mortality. Next to the "all" of my lover's touch what do they count for?

Answering her own question, she undermines this attempt at cavalier disregard. Her words betray an irreducible tenderness for the dead. Blessing them, holding them near, making them beautiful in her lyricism, her words touch even the recalcitrant dead:

> And what of the dead? They lie without shoes
> in their stone boats. They are more like stone
> than the sea would be if it stopped. They refuse
> to be blessed, throat, eye, and knucklebone.

Imaging the dead as "more like stone than the sea would be if it stopped," the persona overrides reality--such that we can see the stoniness of the dead only through the sea. And to see the sea rightly, we must look on it "as if it had stopped." Even stopped, however, the sea is "not so much like stone as the dead." So we must look again (at the sea) and see the sea as a potentiality--ever alive even under its glassy stillness. And when we have finished with this labor, we can never again see the dead as merely stone. Stone has become embedded with the sea.

Both like the stone and like the sea, the dead are made to die and to live in this poem. In fact as the poem closes the dead's very physicality becomes ambiguous. Though "they refuse to be blessed (to hear)/ throat (to speak), eye (to see), knucklebone (to touch)," the persona touches them. Setting down her words across their inert bodies, the persona brings the dead into form, foregrounding their bodiliness with language even as death promises their physical dissolution (their deadness.) The dead, in kind, respond. That is, they talk back, they "refuse to be blessed." And so the poem ends in dialog: the persona touching, blessing; the dead refusing.

Remembering the dead in the very poem written to vanquish them, bringing them near even as it claims to put them far, holding them, cherishing them even as the narrator attempts indifference, *The Truth the Dead Know* cannot help but envelop the dead. In achieving this embrace, the poem momentarily shows Sexton to be a body capable of "that spiritual maturation that makes invention possible" (Dufrenne,1973, p.32). That is, within the world of the poem she inhabits an experiential body capable of feeling all contraries confounded. Where the sheer incompatibility of her emotions might render her senseless in prose, mad in life, this same quality is the driving force that allows her poetry it's plurality of meanings. In *The Truth the Dead Know* the very persona who commits an act of reciprocal psychological violence, turning from the dead as they have turned from her, is the persona who blesses the dead, who touches them and so spares them the scandal of loneliness and separation.

To be capable of such an art, is to have momentarily become a body "capable of spiritual maturation that makes invention possible" (Dufrenne,1973, p.32). Alive, immediate, a source of plenitude, the body bequeathed to Anne Sexton as author is a poetic text whose fullness of meaning continuously transcends her expectations. Such a body can deepen rage, cynicism, flippancy ("Gone I say and walk from church refusing the stiff procession to the grave") until these sentiments show themselves in their more naked form as spiritual emptiness. Such a body can make even the dead to live. To speak, to name the world is to make it real (not naturally but historically). And so the poet invents. She names the dead: "they are more like stone than the sea would be if it stopped." She summons them. That is, she brings to "full sensuous presence" the stone-like impenetrability of the dead as it is situated amidst the more familiar reality of their past aliveness, their sea-likeness. She makes them to be in their new condition. She invents the dead as presence made palpable by absence.

In so doing, she momentarily shows her body to be capable of the particular sentience that makes poetry possible. For such a body nothing is beyond redemption. All things can be felt, known, suffered because they are contextualized always by that which makes meaning. That is, they are integrated into the body's interiority such that pain is always haloed by tenderness, loss by presence, fear by faith, sin by grace.

Conversely, in life Sexton exists without such a body. She speaks of herself as lacking the sentience, inwardness, depth and orientation that embodiment implies. In life, her body is but a thing: "To pray," Sexton writes in her poem *Jesus Walking* (1974) (see Appendix T for complete poem), "...is to be a man carrying a man." (A. Sexton, 1981, p.383). That is, to pray, is to drag the dead weight of her own living body yet another step. The sheer effort it takes to bear her self from one day to the next is Sexton's equivalent of faith. How meager this is. How little it provides in the way of spiritual sustenance; hence Anne's constant references to hunger (" ...and my hunger for love is as immense as your eating people in *Wonderland*" (L. Sexton, 1977, p.396). The point is, however, that in life, the body is somehow an other that Sexton must bear. It is alien, immobile. It impedes. If she is to experience anything, if she is to pray even, she must lift it up and carry forward a body that would otherwise hold her in stasis.

"We feel inert before inert things," Dufrenne (1973, p.278) asserts. And Anne Sexton is inert before her life. As she cannot herself move, it does not move her. Hung, fixed, think like, the world as Anne Sexton visions it is a two-dimensional place without depth, time or flux. Her lack of inner depth is projected directly onto whatever she sees. To her experiential body then the outdoors looks like a calendar: "Soon the yellow leaves will come to New England," Anne writes to lover Phil Legler on September 6, 1967, "ah ache and nostalgia and grief. And why? Grief comes because the outdoors looks like a calendar" (L. Sexton, 1991 p.320). To belong , to make herself a part of such a realm is to wish herself capable of resignation. Were she to give up all hope of restoring her depths, she would not grieve, she would simply exist, uncomplaining. Expressing this ambivalence, she writes to Robert Lowell on June 6, 1963: "One of these days, I will learn to bear myself and to be as lifelike as a snapshot" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.

170). To engage in the life she happens to inhabit, the house where she is a mother, the home where she is a wife, the suburb where she is a neighbor is to accept being one who has no body--who exists only as flat, stultifying image.

In contrast, when she composes poetry, she finds herself released, vital, capable of movement, feeling, touch. And it is while inhabiting such a body, which is but a poetic text, that she is capable of touch. She defines herself then by this possibility in a letter to De Snodgrass, January 11, 1959: "I'm the crazy one who thinks words reach people" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.48). Professing this belief, naming herself by this possibility, she speaks of language as a physical encounter. It can touch, "Language led me by the hand out of madness" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.335); it can bleed: "write some more 'real'...write me some blood" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.109); it can quench thirst, "I am very fond of that book and read it often when I am thirsty or lonely" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.138); it can bruise, "I rather like being slugged; to walk away from the poem with an old wound reopened....to let the poem bruise me" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.69). And in so far as this contact heightens reality, deepens existence, it provides the only contact Anne Sexton can stand. It is also what she has got to have to live: a body--a feeling sentient, expressive body. So it is both hyperbole and truth when she writes to Hollis Summers on March 16, 1960, "Right now I would rather read it (*Henderson the Rain King*) than breath" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.102). Or when she writes, in a moment of anguish to Brother Dennis Farell June 21, 1962: "I'm in trouble NOW. Write me anything.. just words" (L. Sexton, 1991, p. 141). Or when she remarks to De

Snodgrass, April, 1959, "I'm glad you wrote, I thought I had died or something"(L. Sexton, 1991, p. 71).

The urgent bodily need for writing is evident most strikingly in one of the formative moments of Anne's poetic career. Sometime in mid-March of 1958, Sexton encounters a poem by De Snodgrass while skimming an anthology entitled *New Poets of England and America*. Addressed to Snodgrass' three-year-old daughter, the poem, "Heart's Needle," tells how a divorced father endures a legal separation from his daughter by recognizing their perpetual bond. Sexton whose own severe spells of depression has required her to place her youngest daughter, Joy, in her mother-in-law's care is struck by the poem. By her own report, upon reading it she rushes up the hill to retrieve her daughter. Writing to Snodgrass, on March 11, 1959, to describe this experience, Sexton explains "when I read your poem that first time, leafing through the anthology, it walked out at me and grew like a bone in my heart" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.66). Bolstered by antidepressants, Sexton brings Joy home to stay by the summer of 1958.

Without poetry, Anne foregoes the maternity of her body. That is, in her lived experience she denies the body its chance to bond to its own blood, to care for its own issue. While visiting Joy at her mother-in-law's for example, she refuses to dress her daughter for bed. Explaining her conduct to her doctor Sexton offers: "I used to pretend that Joy wasn't mine" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.35). In giving up entirely that which her body has born--because as she expresses it, "I am not feminine enough to be all lost in their care" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.63). Sexton negates her physical being: it has no consequences, no ramifications, no meanings. She is a woman but not feminine, she is a mother but not maternal, "12-fingered out of mind," she is "not a woman quite" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.15). In denying herself her body's experience, she cuts herself off from that which sustains. For it is through the body that we know abundance. As Dufrenne (1973) explains:

> ...here (in my body, my body which is permeated with soul), I know things in the same way that they know me, that is, without explicitly recognizing them. Conscious perception will thereby gain the impression of plenitude. p.338

Anne Sexton's sense of deprivation derives, I would contend, from her disembodied condition. Sporting lines like, "I bite myself and stick myself in a drink to revive"[17] (L. Sexton, 1991, p.320), Sexton's letters reflect her rabid desire to achieve a body and vital existence. This metaphoric gesture of self-destruction can be read as a sign of her need. Less shocking but still in the same vein, Sexton's letter to Joyce Carol Oates, June 4, 1973 follow the same theme. Late in her life she writes Oates saying, "I wish I could borrow some of your surface, your ease, your composure" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.397). To be capable of composure is to be capable of holding one's form, of containing, of embodying. Sexton's lived experience is such that her body is but an intermittent possibility that poetry helps realize. Thus, it is poetry, that having permitted her a body, makes her able to contain:

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[17] Letter to Phil Legler, September 6, 1967

> In becoming aware of myself (in poems) I do not yet know what I am; but I do know that I am something to which the feeling belongs, not something belonging to it (Middlebrook, 1991, p.209).

The experiential body, then, is for Anne Sexton something both essential and elusive; something she can attain only in the province of her poetic work. As author she can compose a text that instantiates in her depth and interiority as well as the capacity to feel and to touch. As author she can make for herself a form/body whose meanings continuously transcend her expectations. But this body is hard-won. Indeed, in her early work, she appropriates such a body. Explaining her strict adherence to given poetic forms, Sexton tells interviewer with Patricia Marx: "If you used form, it was like letting a lot of wild animals out in the arena, but enclosing them in a cage, and you could let some extraordinary animals out if you had the right cage, and that cage would be form"(P. Marx, 1965, p.39-40). Without her poetry and its attendant form/body, however, Anne Sexton exists in an estranged state. Stilted, flat, one-dimensional, the Anne Sexton who inhabits the day-to-day world of Weston, Massachusetts is disembodied, incapable of feeling or of connection.

The Touch of Death

If in its inauguration, poetry gifted Anne Sexton with a sentient, experiential body, how does it happen that two decades later this same poetry can no longer serve? How does poetry come to fail Anne Sexton or she it? To begin grappling with this issue, I would like to examine the second poem Sexton commends to

Steve Axelrod's attention, *The Touch* (1969). Though Sexton writes *The Touch* in the prime of her writing career,[18] it reveals her in her demise rather than her ascent as a poet. For she confronts in this poem a problem that will eventually defeat her as an artist. That is, she attempts to instantiate in poetry the utter absence of a body.

To address this problem Sexton must work against her predominant artistic practice and beliefs. Traditionally Sexton avowed poetry's capacity to embody her. She defined herself by this belief: "I'm the crazy one who thinks that words *reach* (my italics) people" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.48). Her artistic goals were rooted in this faith. Describing her purpose as an artist, for example, Sexton explained to interviewer Barbara Kelves, "I want the reader to feel, ... 'Yes, yes, that's the way it is,' I want them to feel as if they were touching me" (Kelves, 1978, p.22). At least a part of writing's "magic," as Sexton called it, was that it restored to her the body's attendant hold on the world, "..if I can write a poem, ... the world is again a little more sensible and real" (Lacey, 1988, p.234). Given this history and this vision, how then can Sexton use this same medium, poetry, to convey the isolation, the lostness, the sheer dread of living that she feels while disembodied? She cannot. She cannot give form to the suffering that precedes her suicide. She cannot realize a poetic body, run through with blood, spirit, sensuous knowing, to express a terror that has no form. She cannot use a language that ties her in comfort, "let your body in,/ let it tie you in /in comfort," (see Appendix H for complete poem) to express a dread that is beyond all comfort. Nonetheless, she tries, and in so doing, she destroys first her art and then her self (A. Sexton, 1981, p.145).

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[18] She composes *The Touch* in 1966 and wins the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1967.

For as she nears the end of her life, she comes to inscribe the dread that pervades her living over the body that is her poetry. Her late texts are reduced. They become like her: chaotic, corrupt, riddled with the self-loathing and escapism. They fail as art. Sexton admits as much sending some of her late poems to Erica Jong on July 31, 1974 she writes: "Your Whitman poem is really fine and makes me feel guilty for the assorted poems I send because gloom is cheap, yet one writes what one must" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.419). Unlike the poetry that could endowed her with a sentient experiential body, these texts serve simply to chronicle her suffering.

In *The Touch* we find an early exemplar of just such a chronicle. In this work, Sexton tries and fails to make her disembodied condition amenable to her art. The early stanzas of *The Touch* feature a narrator's study of her own hand. Characterizing this hand as "an unconscious woman fed by tubes she knew not of," the persona attempts to define the nature of her suffering. She is insensate. She belongs to an immobile body. Yet, this description does not do justice to her condition. She is not simply a body benumbed. For there remains some semblance of consciousness, some trace of bodiliness, like the phantom pain of an amputated limb, that makes her capable of dread. She dreads existing as she is: "not alive but not quite dead." And yet the poem cannot bring forth the presence of this dread. Her metaphors will not build, deepening the scope of her conception, allowing her to write “more than I knew I knew” (L.Sexton, 1991, p.142). She is but amassing stray images to no clear purpose. She cannot concatenate a vision. After likening the hand to “subway railings,” to something “bruised” and “imprisoned,” to a “clock that you could tell time by,” and to “an unconscious woman fed by tubes she knew not of,” Sexton dismisses metaphor. She opens the third stanza prosaically saying: “And all this is metaphor/ An ordinary hand--just lonely/ for something to touch/ that touches back.” Like her images, however, her prose operates as mere object. She is left with a language that reports, that delivers information, but does not offer up a sensual body, animate with meaning. Failing this endeavor, she tries yet another line of development. She creates a text that valorizes the death and sexualizes suicide. Though capable of a seductive magnetism, (death is better than nothingness), this effort likewise fails as art. For the impulse to animate the body by annihilating it cannot finally serve to produce the transcendence of art. Setting forth a pattern that will emerge again in her late work, the early stanzas of *The Touch* show both an effort to write, a repudiation of that effort, and an attempt to escape into the sexual.

The Effort to Write

To better understand how the problem in *The Touch* eventually defeats Sexton as an artist, we must follow her into her late work. In this work, as in *The Touch,* Sexton expresses her disembodied experience in poetry only to find that it will not lend itself to such treatment. Pervaded by dread, Sexton cannot give life to a poem and render for herself its concomitant embodiment. Rather her efforts to write produce a text that is but a reflection of her perverse living.

Confession, once the source of her best art, appears in her late life to put her at risk. To write is to make manifest her radical discontinuity with the body. Her late texts heighten her terror, exposing the nature of her suffering without ameliorating it. In *Talking Sheep* (1976) (for complete poem see Appendix I), for example, voices are displaced into foreign forms. The mother's voice becomes like water; the father's is "thrown into a cigar," the great aunt's is "thrown into a lost child at the freak's circus" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.486). To speak is to risk making evident her dislocation and disorientation. For the voice no longer inheres. To write of this condition in her poetry, however, in no way alters it. For even as she writes, Sexton is throwing her voice into 'a costume of her own making' as she gives readings (L. Sexton, 1991, p.396). Writing fellow author Joyce Carol Oates on June 4, 1973, Sexton explains "I am popularly known as the crazy poet,...And after all, it is my fault. I did write about it so thoroughly, explored it so I made my own costume, so to speak, and at each reading I must step into it, although it no longer fits" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.396). When she reads from her work, she dissociates. Thrown into a poem where she no longer inheres, her voice performs lines which summon a sense of a body -- but it is not Sexton's body. She does not recognize herself in it. For these lines no longer tell of her as she is. And so to read her poetry is to assume a body that is not, by feeling, her own.

Her March seventh 1974 reading in Harvard's Saunder's Theater demonstrates this point. Having spent the morning in a fugue state slumped on the floor of her therapist's office and having drunk heavily as was her pre-reading practice, she begins her reading, slurry and unintelligible: "Only once in my life have I dedicated a reading..." (L. Sexton, 1994, p.159). Yet just when she looks as if she will dissolve into incoherence, she regains herself. She stands up, her voice grows deep and steady, and she carries forth. So posed, Sexton proceeds to give an electrifying reading in which she banters with the audience and eventually bows to a standing ovation (adapted from D. Middlebrook's description, 1991, p.395). To watch her read is quite literally to see her voice re-locate itself. Pulled out of the dead, dissipated forty-five year old Sexton, the voice is thrown into a performing body where it expresses "a practiced emotion, one I've felt before"[19] (Middlebrook, 1991, p.391). Sexton's own jokes intimate as much. Reading from, *The Death Notebooks*, newly published and *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, still in manuscript, she jokes that she is reading from her posthumously published works. In many ways, she is. Her own body is all but dead. Her performing body is not rightly hers. In March of 1974, barely more than six months before her death, her ghost of a body has been animated, posthumously it would seem, by the sheer charisma of her poetry.

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[19] Citing tapes of the therapy session betwen Anne Sexton and Dr. Martin Orne, Middlebrook explains: "Back in 1969 she (Anne Sexton) commented to Dr. Orne about this facility for switching into a performance mode: "I could perform just before I die, I think, but it's a performance of the poems. I know the lines--it's a practiced emotion, one I've felt before--"(Middlebrook, 1991, p.391)

Elaborating another version of this theme, Sexton's work shows how her being is vulnerable to appropriation by foreign voices. Without a body, without something to enclose her, Sexton is readily taken over by the opportunist. In *Passion of the Mad Rabbit* (1976) (see Appendix J for complete poem) an intruder walks right into the narrator's body and begins speaking in her place:

> I underwent a removal, a tearing of the skin off me
> ...and as these phenomenon occurred, a fool walked straight into me.
> He was named Mr. Rabbit. My own voice spoke to people,
> anyone, friends, strangers on the street saying
> "I am Mr. Rabbit." p. 484

Again in this passage we can see how writing documents but does not mitigate Sexton's bodiless condition. She is her own impostor. Looking for companionship in drunken late night telephone calls or brief liaisons with fans and hired help:[20] her "own voice" speaks as she reports it in the poem "to people anyone, friends, strangers on the street." In engagements of this kind, all contact becomes equally meaningless. Her voice has been appropriated by the impostor and so does not discriminate between strangers and friends. Both are merely anyone and no one to her. As impostor, she feels no need to anchor what she says in what she lives. Her most critical relationships are marked by deception. Misrepresenting her finances to her last psychiatrist, Dr. Chase, as well as others, she holds that she alone faces "the terrible financial responsibility" of "two rather adult daughters" whose schooling "necessitates more readings than I would care to give and may necessitate me going from a part time professor at Boston University to a full time" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.401). In fact, Sexton's husband, Kayo is paying both Linda's and Joy's tuition in full. By accidentally revealing this fact to Chase, Sexton brings about a confrontation that ruins their relationship.

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[20] Finding herself without suitors in her intimate life, she turns to her hired nurse whom her daughter, Linda, surmises shares her drinking bouts as well as her marital bed. (L. Sexton, 1994, p.173).

Her own past becomes a part of this disavowal. Her life as a poet is subject to doubt. Without a body she can bear no history nor can she have continuity with any future. She has spent her life asserting that if she existed, she existed in her poetry. Writing to her daughter Linda she urges: "Talk to my poems, talk to your heart--I'm in both: if you need me,"(L. Sexton, 1991, p. 424) or to Brother Dennis Farrell: "I am awfully glad you found some "truth" in my letters and that, somehow or other, I managed to reveal that I am I.. that I of the poems.." (L. Sexton, 1991, p.137). As she nears death, however, she rescinds this claim. Writing to Erica Jong in June of 1974 after meeting her in New York City during a reading, Sexton says, "I only want to say ...that isn't the real me, the woman of the poems, the woman of the kitchen , the woman of the private (but published) hungers" (L.Sexton, 1991, p. 413).

This disavowal is thorough. To declare she is "not the woman of the kitchen" is to claim that she is not that "true self" her poems once found her to be. To make such an assertion is to take from her self, her single most meaningful achievement: the making of a self that was at once private and universal, particular and true. For the phrase the "woman of the kitchen," is one Sexton originates in a poem and later appropriates to her letters, signing them, "from my kitchen to your kitchen" as an expression of intimacy and affection. Initially part of the poem, *For John Who Begs Me Not To Inquire Further* (1960) (see Appendix K for complete poem), this phrase captures the whole raison d'être of Sexton's poetry. In *For John Who Begs Me Not To Inquire Further,* the emerging artist defends her practice of writing about her suicide and despair in "the commonplaces of the asylum." She asserts, "At first it (her despair) was private./Then it was more than myself;/ it was you, or your house, or your kitchen." The phrase, "your kitchen," refers both to the dread that I have in my kitchen, my private mundane life, and the dread you, dear reader, have in yours. Hence the "it" becomes "more than myself."

In rescinding this identity ("I am not the woman of the kitchen"), in suggesting that even this hard won self is but borrowed, a fiction, a lie, Anne Sexton reveals the depth of her disaffection. Nothing, not even her poetry, is to be spared denigration. And such complete abjection cannot give itself over to art, cannot open itself to grace. Thus she appears in her late writing as she is, a front, a voiceless body, a body without voice, a woman without a clear interior or exterior, without a past or a future, a no body.

Both *Passion of the Mad Rabbit* (1976) and *The Talking Sheep*, (1976) are given over to depicting this state. Both texts show how the voice which is intimate and internal to our bodily being is subject to violation, invasion, "Mr. Rabbit walked right into me.."(*Passion of the Mad Rabbit*), and exile, "my mother's voice was thrown into a cigar" (*The Talking Sheep*). No longer issuing from the speaker's body, a given voice and the language it speaks are only coincidentally affiliated with one body and then another. Such a language has no fidelity to any one's lived experience. Such a language is not expressive and cannot be used then to fashion an identity.

And this bleak state is the very one within which Sexton passes her last days. She has no confidence that what she says will adhere to who she is. Even as she declares to Axelrod, for example, that *The Truth* and the last two stanzas of *The Touch* have the most meaning for her "to this day," she simultaneously undercuts this declaration, countering, "although that is just a passing thought and I could change my mind in five minutes" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.382). In short, she makes clear how there is nothing that holds her to her words. No identity stays her, gives her weight, allows her to last. She is completely subject to an indifferent and external time. She has no interiority with which to live the meaningful; "I am the misplacer of the meaningful"(L. Sexton, 1991, p.142). The passage of but a few minutes could erase, alter, obviate even that which mattered most.

Having forfeited allegiance to a given body, Sexton's late texts go on to show how such language has nothing in particular to say. In *Talking Sheep*, for example, the persona explains that she must learn to say "ba" to the black sheep I am:"

> It was wise, the wise men said
>
> wise to cry Baa and be smiling into your mongoloidhood,

> ...Or else to sew your lips shut
> and not let a word or a deadstone sneak out.

Imaged as mere senseless sound, stripped of expression, and subject to muting, the language she is advised to assume is severely diminished. To use it, is to put herself at yet greater risk than she was when she spoke in a dislocated voice. The "ba, ba" in *Talking Sheep* or the "shriek of my heart like a phone off the hook," in *Passion of the Mad Rabbit* are tiring and monotonous. Restricted to monosyllabic sounds, Sexton cannot elaborate, digress, qualify or refine meaning. She cannot begin to write and find herself surprised by a thought or an image that arises spontaneously out of language itself. If she attempts to communicate with another using such a language, she does not find herself in communion with them because of the open quality of her expression. In fact, the opposite, the more openly and insistently she sounds her monosyllable, the more tiring she becomes. Nothing new comes of her attempt to write, nothing is exposed or revealed. The prudent move then is to keep such words to yourself, "One learns not to blab about all this except to yourself or the typewriter keys" (A. Sexton, 1981, p. 548). But even this will not work. First such a move proves severely isolating. Second, and perhaps more significant, the ruined language that Sexton is working with and living in estranges her from herself as readily as it alienates her from others.

Even as her own sole audience, Sexton feels put off, rather than being drawn in by this language. Referring to her effort to write, she reports: "I'm getting bored with it" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.548). What is tedious here, however, can quickly become deadly. If as in *The Passion of the Mad Rabbit*, the persona's voice is but a grating repetitive sound, "the shriek of my heart like the phone off the hook," then this language can quickly become difficult to bear. Offering nothing, but a kind of perpetual demand, such language strains patience to the point of inviting destruction, "squashing." To be bored, put off, disaffected by the very voice that comes out of one's mouth, to turn against that which inhabits one is to make ready for self-destruction.

We are beginning to develop an understanding of how it is that Sexton would be led to use writing to obviate the body. Language as an expressive possibility has failed her. Her dread is not amenable to expression in poetry. But Anne cannot accept this experience as final. Hence she begins to write frantically, compulsively as she herself says, "like a wolf at a live heart" (for complete poem see Appendix L) (A. Sexton, 1981, p.466). In her desperation, she comes to eviscerate language itself. She treats it as she treats her own living corporeal body. Just as she dismisses her body's needs and wishes--forgetting to eat (at 5'8" she weighs 110 lbs in her last year), drinking heavily (even slipping liquor into her coffee during morning faculty meetings at Boston University), foregoing contact with others (she banishes her friends calling them a "witches' coven," (Middlebrook, 1991, p.392) when they attempt to provide her with a 24-hour suicide watch) so too she dismisses her writing's need for revision "I hope it is well written but that seems extraneous" (L.Sexton, 1991, p.392). Where once she took care to prepare her poems, typing them carefully, in an uncharacteristically neat fashion, on erasable bond paper, dating them, arranging them in book like sequences in their folders (Middlebrook, 1991, p.45) late in her life, she works maniacally with no time for the niceties of form. As she was reckless and ruinous with her own living body, so, too, she is with her text-body. Language whose beauty was that it once came out of her as it came upon her---like grace, now merely comes out of her.

In the face of such a demise, Sexton formulates a different tact. She will attempt to use language to sexualize her self destruction. Perhaps by taking this approach, she can once again manage the fragile process of assembling meaning. If she is, as she expresses it, "mouth at the wall," (L. Sexton, 1991, p.229) if no constancy governs her last months and days, if stripped of a body, no lived experience informs her present, then might she not take recourse in writing a death-bound erotica? Such writing might serve both to summon and consume the body. For what she seeks is not just any death. What she seeks is a particular death in which she might "split/from my life with no flag,/ no belly,/ no cry" (A.Sexton, 1981, p.54). The text she strives for is one that might both satisfy and eliminate desire, bestow and dispense with the body in one movement so that she could die with "no cry."

Anticipating her late work, the closing stanzas of *The Touch* show just this line of development. In the last two stanzas of *The Touch* that she commends to Axelrod's attention, Sexton equates the bodily capacity to touch with death.

Then all this became history

Your hand found mind

Life rushed to my fingers like a blood clot.

Imaged as a seizure of energy, the touch depicted in this poem, resembles an orgasmic contraction that bears within itself, its own extinction.

Late in her life exhausted by the work of bearing her hideous, drunken (she is an advanced alcoholic), lecherous body (she is soliciting sex from old lovers, fans and hired help) from day to day, Sexton revisits this theme both in her writing and her conduct. To escape the body, she rehearses a suicide that entails submerging herself in sexual rapture. Her writing serves to bolster and reify this escape rather than avert it. For example, shortly after she exchanges sharp words with life-long friend and colleague Maxine Kumin, she goes home and puts on one of her most provocative red reading dresses. She then takes a cab to the bank of the Charles River directly opposite her daughter Linda's Harvard dormitory. She dances along the embankment, trailing in and out of the water while washing down handfuls of pills with a thermos of milk. A passerby eventually stops her and takes her to Mount Auburn Hospital Emergency Room (description adapted from L. Sexton, 1994, p. 16). Subsequently recounting this escapade in her work, she writes a poem entitled *The Red Dance* (1976) (see Appendix M for complete poem):

...Cars and trucks went by

on Memorial Drive.

And the Harvard students in the brick

hallowed houses studied Sappho in cement rooms.
And this Sappho danced on the grass
and danced and danced and danced
It was a death dance.
(...)
and this strange Sappho knew she would enter the lights
and be lit by them and sink into them
And how the end would come--
it had been foretold to her--
she would aspirate swallowing a fish
going down with God's first creature
dancing all the way.

Aligning herself with Sappho, Sexton indulges in a grandiose account of her conduct. Sappho, a lyric Greek poet and a lesbian threw herself into the sea after having been spurned in love. Sexton while not spurned by a lover, has been spurned by a friend or so she sees it. After their joint reading, Sexton mistook Kumin to say that her flamboyant performances were but prostitutions (L. Sexton, 1994, p.163). Her poem *The Red Dance* and her dance along the Charles incorporate this accusation. In both she assumes a prostitute's stance, dressed in red, dancing on the water's edge while taking "kill-me pills,"(Middlebrook, 1991, p.34), soliciting attention, pity, sex, death. In her poem, she glorifies her suicide attempt, equating her life with Sappho's: implying that she has been scorned by a great love rather than scolded by an exasperated friend, implying that her suicide would be strange, luminous ("she would enter the lights and be lit by them"), fated ("it had been foretold"), primordial ("with God's first creature"), when it is but a pathetic, deluded plea for attention. She has perverted her writing. She who once gave herself to her poetry allowing it to embody her and show her "more than she knew, she knew," now makes the poetry to serve her. In writing it, she treats her work as but another one of her whores. Rather than making visible a deeper truth, her texts now attempt to sexualize and thereby obfuscate her loneliness, and her absolute absence of a body.

Like the hand in *The Touch*, that dances, "in the attic," and "in Vienna" this body that *The Red Dance* makes manifest is operating on the level of the merely sensuous and as such it can be exhausted. It is not sustainable and yet Sexton reifies it, claiming just the opposite. For while the dance lasts, it offers the "all" which Sexton seeks in poetry. While it lasts this sexualized text is the closest thing to plenitude that Sexton can attain. While it lasts, this arousal offers Sexton some vestige of a body.

Offering a damning critique of Sexton's late writing, Joyce Carol Oates describes Sexton's late work as "a deliberate betrayal" of her earlier work (Oates, 1989, p.60). Asserting that Anne Sexton makes no attempt at "translating emotion into a coherent poetic image," Oates ascribes to Sexton a "lust to destroy poetry itself" (Oates, 1989, p.60). While acknowledging the presence of such a lust, I would suggest--just contrary to what Oates claims--that it is precisely Sexton's relentless attempts to "translate emotion into a coherent poetic image," that lead her to destroy poetry.

Attempting both to express and resist her disembodied condition Sexton writes. Linda Sexton reports:

> Anne turned increasingly to her work--often writing all day long and forgetting to eat. ...Between June of 1972 and October 1974, she had written three new books: *The Death Notebooks, The Awful Rowing Toward God* and *45 Mercy Street* (L. Sexton, 1991, p.390).

The sheer proliferation of her late work testifies to the frenzied panic with which she searches line after line to find a language that can name and thereby ground her suffering in poetry, her pain in a body. And yet no words prove adequate.[1] And where this failing irritated Sexton in *The Touch* and led her to dismiss metaphor, it enrages her in her late work, leading her to damn language altogether. Expressing her rage in her posthumously published volume, *45 Mercy Street*, Sexton contends that her poetry is worth no more than "a cut penny and the entrails of a cat" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.484). Barren of that intimate experiential body it once bore, language fails her. More than this, language betrays her. Though she turns to it frantically to find a way to live, her late texts refuse her, insisting over and over again that her suffering is "unbearable because it belongs to no one"--to no body (Alvarez, 1971, p.269).[21]

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[21] "And perhaps what finally makes a man kill himself is not the firmness of his resolve but the unbearable quality of this anguish which belongs to no one, of this suffering in the absence of a sufferer..," (Alvarez, 1971, p.269).

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Anne Sexton: A Psychological Portrait

PAPER III

Revision and the Writer

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Revision and the Writer

In my first paper, "Love and the Writer," and my second paper "Death and the Writer," I discussed how poetry saves Anne Sexton by endowing her respectively with a presence and an experiential, sentient body. In both papers I show how as she ages, her writing deteriorates and is no longer able to work as "dear magic" (see Appendix S, p.202). In "Love and the Writer" the aging poet resorts to defending her narcissism rather than expressing her love. In "Death and the Writer," she struggles doggedly to give expression to her disembodied condition only to find that this condition is not amenable to such treatment. Her writing disintegrates. Without its poetics, her text fails to embody her. Rather it serves merely to make blatant and terrifying the fact that her suffering belongs to no body. In the last of my three papers, as in the proceeding two, I will look at Anne Sexton through her writing. Again I will ask: how does it happen that poetry first protects and then fails to protect its author from suicide? I will explore the possibility that it is not the initial casting of the poem, but rather the (a particular kind of) tenacious revision that allows Sexton to speak of poetry as saving her. As early as January of 1973 (Sexton's suicide occurs October 4, 1974) Sexton's capacity for revision was beginning to wane. Dismissing revision as a nicety, Sexton herself says of her newest manuscript, *The Death Notebooks*:

> ...I hope they (her poems) are well written but that seems extraneous... I ought to be able to know how to write by now, I ought to know how to live by now. That is, I ought to be able to dig a trench in my soul and find

> something there. (L. Sexton, 1991, p.392, Letter to editor Cindy Degner, January 11, 1973)

The poet who was once willing to receive her art in due time, now insists on seizing it: " I ought to be able to dig a trench in my soul and find something there." Clamoring for a find, she expects to simply set down rhymes and reap revelation. Yet in dispensing with revision, she shuns the very process which she once identified as the heart of writing. What the older poet flags as extraneous ("I hope it is well written but that seems extraneous"), the younger one once hailed as the "very stuff of poetry." Consider a letter she writes aspiring poet Jonathan Korso on August, 12, 1965. Cautioning Korso against just "letting the miracle just flow from the pen," the thirty-six year old Sexton contends: "Hell, I'm undisciplined too, in everything but my work...and the discipline the reworking the forging into being is the very stuff of poetry... the original impulse is only that" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.267). Late in her life when Sexton foregoes revision in a frenzied effort to lay bare her soul, she inadvertently strips away the one practice which could at least momentarily make that soul palpable and by extension, her life tolerable.

Once she jettisons her formidable revision practices, her writing becomes merely a mirror. She has no miracle or magic with which to unveil another possible self. Instead, she finds in her writing merely herself as she lives: "Do I not look in the mirror and see a drunken rat avert her eyes" (see Appendix N for complete poem) (A. Sexton, 1981, p.537). And this stark image serves only to reflect and make inescapable her degradation. Nothing new comes of her writing, nothing unexpected. Whatever she knows in life, she merely knows again in writing. The act of setting down experience in language yields no more than that. Tedious, relentless, her words chronicle the unrelieved horror of her days, making that horror only more certain and concrete.

As this unversed writing proliferates and prevails, she begins to regard her art with the same excruciating self-loathing with which she regards the rest of her life. While her letters muffle this disenchantment, "gloom is cheap but one writes what one must,"[22] her poetry declares it, no holds barred (L. Sexton, 1991, p.419). In her posthumously published volumes she refers to her own poetry as a "compulsion," a "latrine of my details" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.484) (See Appendix I for complete poem) and as "something crooked and vain and cut from a book" (A. Sexton, 1981, p. 508) (See Appendix U for complete poem). And although this rupture in her relationship to writing is but one of many, it is perhaps the most intimate and therefore the most significant.

To better understand this failed relationship and Sexton's own attendant suicide, I propose to study in depth the process of revision. For it is the practice and the quality of revision that separates her early work from her late work. To do so I will study the manuscript of one of Sexton's early poems, *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* (1962) (see Appendix O for complete poem). I choose this poem for two reasons. First, in contrast to poems that required 20-30 drafts of 300 typewritten pages, *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* emerged relatively quickly. As the product of an efficient drafting process, the poem offers itself as a useful candidate for the study of revision. For the work shows how--even in its condensed form--revision plays a critical role. That is, the poem underscores the fact that it is the nature, not the amount, of revision that matters most. Secondly, I choose this poem because in its focus on female emancipation, it anticipates a thematic concern that Sexton will take up again in some of her late unrevised work such as *Leaves that Talk* (1976)(see Appendix P for complete poem) and *Consecrating Mother* (1976) (see Appendix Q for complete poem). In *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* and these later works, female solidarity makes possible a particular kind of liberation: that is, by entering into communion with other women, the female persona in these poems finds a space in which she is able to exist in an uncompromised form. To the degree *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* shares this thematic focus with Sexton's later work, it allows us to see how the poem's revision process rather than its content affects Anne Sexton.

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[22] Letter to Erica Jong July 31, 1974.

What Is the Poem About?

Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound is one of three poems Sexton composes in response to a brief affair she has with fellow poet James Wright during a weekend on Montauk, Long Island in the summer of 1960. According to friend and colleague Maxine Kumin, the poem was drafted almost entirely the moment Anne sighted four nuns on an actual ferry crossing. Assuming the form of a letter to her ex-lover, the poem centers on a leave-taking. Working straight out of her own autobiographical past, Sexton begins the poem with a persona who has just broken off her affair. As this persona departs on the ferry to cross Long Island Sound, she oscillates between a fragile valiance ("I have made it this far as I said I would") and a bitter resignation. The prospect of setting off on her own means the prospect of existing defenseless in a treacherous world. In such a realm, that which might save is both useless ("a cement lifeboat") and hostile ("KEEP OFF" the sign reads suspended above it"). Forced to assume a self reliant stance ("Oh all right, I say,/ I'll save myself"), the persona's vehemence stands as a thin defense against "all the eyes of all the terrible fish who wait for me" (see Appendix S, p.207, for full manuscript).[23] Just as the persona confronts her bleak fate, she catches sight of four nuns. Her horizon shifts. Her estrangement--reconfigured in their image--unfolds before her as emancipation.

Quite literally making her own loveless condition parenthetical, the persona launches the body of the poem, declaring: "Oh God, although I am very sad, could you please let these four nuns loosen from their leather boots and their wooden chairs/ to rise out /over the greasy deck..." The nuns foray into the blue sky, their flight up over the "greasy deck" and over the seductive "winds that take the ears and toes of the rider" becomes the narrator's new focus. Attentive to this new sight--its paradoxes and peculiarities--the persona's world is enlarged. The world becomes more than she and her lost love. Telling the nuns' story rather than her own, she is allowed to reenact her predicament in a different frame to different effects. In doing so she transcends her despair over a lost affair and uncovers in leave-taking an occasion for celebration.

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[23] Thank you to the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin for permitting me access to this manuscript.

As the poem progresses, Sexton's persona enjoins us and her lover to behold her "dark girls." She thrills to the sight of the nuns' ascent. Unconventional as it is correct, the nuns' flight makes manifest another possible world in which a woman might, "loosen from her leather boots," from the restrictions of her order without fear. Leave-taking that was once imbued with dread is now replete with transcendence and possibility. "Flying four abreast, singing without sound, drinking the sky without smiles or hands or shoes" her dark girls epitomize the rightness, the fineness, the unorthodoxness of female self reliance.

In following this image, by placing herself in service of its thematic demand, Sexton permits the poem to realize her in another form. At least while she writes, Sexton "ceases to be real in order to be true" (Dufrenne, 1973, p.136). No longer real, she is not the dependent wife of Kayo Sexton and the seductive lover of numerous others. She is not the apprentice poet who writes coyly to mentor De Snodgrass November 15, 1958, "I am always being saved by men who understand me better than I understand myself" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.41). For a time, relieved of her dire need for love, she is someone else. As she expresses this condition in her own work, "Once I was beautiful, now I am myself" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.3).

What happens for Sexton in the drafting process?

By tracing the revision process in *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound*, I propose to explore how it is that Anne Sexton effaces herself to find herself.[24] I am particularly interested in the revising process as it is Sexton's capacity to revise that separates her life-bearing art from her death-bound texts.

Specifically, I contend that while she revises Sexton is compelled to work against the psychic pattern that predisposes her to self destruction. As she herself describes it, her madness consists of a deadly involution. The self folds in upon itself, collapsing, festering and eclipsing all that stands outside it. Admonishing aspiring poet Jonathan Korso to guard against such a condition, Sexton writes:

> As for madness.. hell! Most poets are mad. It doesn't qualify them for anything. Madness is a waste of time. It creates nothing. Even though I'm often crazy, and I am and I know it, still I fight it because I know how sterile and futile, how bleak..nothing grows form it and you, meanwhile, only grow into it like a snail. (L. Sexton, 1991, p.267).

Caught in the centripetal force of her madness, Sexton repeatedly refers to herself as smothering. Her own tears choke her, "tears clogged my throat" (see Appendix S, p.205, for complete manuscript). She suffocates. Her own internal motor usurps the space, "I have a motor in me that keeps vibrating, sucking up all the room" (L. Sexton,1991, p. 397). Her own gestures invade her. In "The Love

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[24] Thank you to Leo Mos for this phrase.

Plant" her persona sticks a rose behind her ear and it seeps into her brain and drives her insane, "and she will stick it (a rose) behind her ear/ not know it will crawl into her ear, her brain/ and drive her mad" (see Appendix V for complete poem) (A. Sexton, 1981, p.528). Damned by a self absorption so intense that it threatens to annihilate her, Sexton turns to writing.

As she writes, and more particularly as she revises, she finds that her emerging poetry can sometimes reverse the psychic pattern that generates this madness. For in grappling with the poem, Sexton may be turned away from her imploding self toward the work of art. To revise effectively is to respond to the call of the work. To say that which the poem wants to say, Sexton must subordinate her own pressing concerns to the thematic demands of the work. She must look upon her self with dispassion. She must draw from her memories, associations, feelings only that which furthers the work. Once she has given her self over to the work in this way, she cannot help but regard her internal world more objectively. That is, quite literally, her lies, transgressions, loves and griefs become like objects or materials. They appear before her but do not consume her. Instead, it is she who acts on them, arranging and "re-arranging the disaligned" (A. Sexton, 1981, p. 16) (see Appendix E for complete poem.) This shift reverses the prevailing psychic pattern that governs her day-to-day experience. Instead of existing as passive subject of her own mad vortex "I underwent a removal" (see Appendix J for complete poem) (A. Sexton, 1981, p.538), she can "Force discipline upon madness" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.268). She can find some order there in the "narrow diary" of the mind (A. Sexton, 1981, p.34). Transposing her life into poetry, she can reverse the pull of her madness. She can re-possess herself. She can become someone else.

The Phenomenological Artist

To appreciate this point more fully, I turn to the final version *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* and to Dufrenne's (1973) description of the phenomenological creator. The artist, Dufrenne proposes

> ...is often unequal, if not even markedly inferior, to his work, so much so that on meeting him we are surprised that he has created it. It seems that the creator whose act we describe is really the phenomenological creator who appears to the public only through his work. p.31

In looking at the arduous revisions that Sexton undertakes, I will show how at least while she works, she is able to make herself manifest as the "phenomenological creator."

In the initial stanzas of *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound*, Anne Sexton appears to us, via her persona, as she is in her day-to-day experience. Like her persona, Sexton is cornered. Like her persona, Sexton's vision imposes itself upon the world such that all she experiences is her own doubt, hostility and rage. As Anne writes in the poem, the perceived world for such a woman is nothing more than her own eyes.

> Still I have eyes,
>
> These are my eyes:

the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver
that hangs at my knees;
the cement lifeboat that wears
its dirty canvas coat
the faded sign that sits on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.

Moreover, her eyes are those that will not save: "the orange letters on the life preserver", "the cement lifeboat", "the faded sign that says KEEP OFF." In short, the opening stanzas render for us Anne Sexton caught in the vortex of her madness, seeing only herself and her own antipathy. Bitter, fearful and without recourse, the persona then encounters the small miracle of the poem: she sees something else. She sees the nuns.

Over my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club
their faces poked out
from under their habits
as good as good babies who
have sunk into their carriages.
Without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts

of their arms
I see what remains
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

Holy, unmarked by the secular world, the nuns are beings with souls. Though they, too, are subject to the constraints of the conventional world and the temptations of the secular world, they remain unaltered, incorruptible and on some level free. That is, though they sit like a bridge club undifferentiated, conforming, bound by their properness, determined by their institutions, they are not only that. Their being is not exhausted or explained by either their given nature: their physical bodies that resemble good babies, or by their historical nature: their habits, their leather boots, their wooden chairs. Rather something of who they are remains hidden, secret, inviolable, mysterious. In the nuns we find another Anne Sexton. We find Anne Sexton, the phenomenological creator. We find Anne Sexton, the poet who knows that life has depth, that appearances harbor secret lives. Describing what she does as she works and works to bring forth a poem, Sexton explains: "I'm hunting for the truth. It might be a kind of poetic truth, and not just a factual one, because behind everything that happens to you, every act, there is another truth, a secret life" (Marx, 1985, p.73).

Figuring the nuns, then as beings committed to refining the quality of their souls, Sexton shows how they do not yield to winds that pull the skirts of their arms without discrimination, leaving them "almost undressed."

> Dearest
> See how my dark girls sally forth,
> over the passing lighthouse of Plum Gut,
> its shell as rusty
> as a camp dish
> as fragile as a pagoda on a stone
> out over the little lighthouse
> that warns me of drowning winds
> that rub over its blind bottom
> and its blue cover;
> winds that will take the toes and ears of the rider
> or the lover.

Despite this seduction, they are not ravished--by the other or by their own passions. They are not taken and made vulnerable to abandonment, as the persona-narrator has been. Rather they are stoic, resolved, and though surrounded by worldly constraints and seductions, they are not finally subject to them. For they live in accord with a hidden absolute (an ever-present divinity both within and without) that supersedes such determinations. Their emancipation then can be imagined.

Like the persona, the nuns must loosen themselves from what binds them, "their leather boots, their wooden chairs, ... the greasy deck.." all that is obsolete, tradition-bound and constricting. And yet, when they do, the persona sees that they are not frail and fearful as she was. They are fragile only in so far as they are young, new, unevolved primitive as babies or fish: "nodding their pink heads to one side, flying four abreast/ in the old fashioned side stroke/ each mouth open and round/ breathing together as fish do."

They do not yet have voices. They do not yet have that which makes possible their individuation. But they have something equally meaningful: they have a solidarity "flying four abreast" that is impregnable for "singing together without sound" they commune in a language that is outside the rational, socially negotiated one. They are free then to speak themselves into being without interference from the outside world.

This vision of release shows us Anne Sexton in all her rich ambiguity, as a woman who is she is.[25] While in life Sexton venerates language, in her art Sexton can be found searching for a language that is not a language. As "singing without sound" in *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* serves to sequester the nuns from the intrusion of language, so too in *Keeping the City* (1976), (see Appendix C for complete poem) the watchman "guards" his child by refraining from speech: "The wings of the watchman/ if I spoke, would hurt the bird of your soul/ as he nested, bit, sucked, flapped" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.494) and in *Consecrating Mother* (1976) (see Appendix Q for complete poem) the narrator honors the oceanic mother by acknowledging that she exists outside language: "but I could not define her,/ I could not name her mood" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.555). Sexton the writer, as she presents in these works, aspires as ardently to transcend language as she does to create it.

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[25] "In what does this plurality of meaning originate?... in the ambiguity of man who is never what he is" (Dufrenne, 1973, p. 321).

In the closing stanza, Sexton, the phenomenological artist, also shows herself capable of a different relationship to death. Envisioning the nuns' death as a dissolution and a communion, Sexton departs from her standard suicidal ideation. Frequently in Sexton's work, the act of dissolving and becoming consubstantial with another woman (or lover[26]) constitutes suicide. In *Consecrating Mother* the persona longs to immerse herself in the ocean-mother and be subsumed, she longs to drown herself. In *Leaves That Talk* (1976) (see Appendix P for complete poem) the persona speaks of her green girls (the green leaves) as seducers to whom she wants to give herself: "they want me, they need me. I belong lying down under them" (A. Sexton, 1981, p.541).

In contrast to these late works, communion with women in *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* suggests solidarity and ascendance. While the nuns move in unison, swimming the old fashioned sidestroke together, singing in one voice, they do not dissolve into one another, nor does the narrator dissolve into them. Instead as they ascend, they become transparent, ethereal; their hands and shoes fade into the air. Their voices, their capacity to speak and to be, their capacity for self realization, meanwhile remains. Heading toward "the guazy edge of paradise," disappearing into the sky, they engage in a mystical union with the universe. And though this union involves a dissolution of sorts, this dissolution is suggestive of a holy, celebratory death rather than a despairing one. Rather than escaping into the ego of another, the Anne Sexton this closing stanza posits is an Anne Sexton who wishes to shed her ego, not to escape life, but rather so that she might open herself to the sky. Hence Sexton's persona-narrator, hears her dark girls transformation into an ethereal nothingness as "good news, good news:"

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[26] In *The Touch*, the narrator persona is both animating and annihilated by contact with the lover. In *Starry Night*, to be sucked up into the pulsating night is to be utterly subsumed, taken with "no cry."

> There go my dark girls,...
> See them rise
> on black wings, drinking
> the sky, without smiles
> or hands
> or shoes.
> They call back to us
> from the gauzy edge of paradise,
> good news, good news.

To review, then, the phenomenological artist, as *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound*" has realized her, is a woman who lives in accord with her own secret, whose reality is not given by or limited to social conventions. She is a woman who cannot be taken by another for she does not submit to seduction. She is a woman who trusts silence more than words. She is a woman who takes death to be a reunion with life itself. To know in her self this other of the poem, is to be redeemed. But this redemption only becomes available to her through the hard work of revision.

Revision: Sexton's Manuscript

To examine Sexton's drafting process, I begin with a study of her first handwritten draft and progress to a study of two exemplary sections from her typewritten drafts. Though there is no valorium edition of Sexton's manuscript, her first handwritten draft can be separated from subsequent typewritten ones. In this first draft, we can see that certain features of the poem are already in place. Sexton has set up the poem's dramatic structure. It is to be written as a letter to the ex-lover with the stanzas beginning "Dearest you." In addition, she has set out many of the poem's poetic phrases[27]:

> "the sea is the face of Mary grown old and rough with age,"
>
> (see Appendix S, p.204)
>
> "four nuns who sit like a bridge club,"
>
> (see Appendix S, p.200)
>
> "I am so surprised to see that the ocean is still going on."
>
> (see Appendix S, p.203)

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[27] I adapt this observation from one that Stephen Vinson (1992) originally makes in his article, *"Wild Animals Out in the Arena": Anne Sexton's Revisions for "All My Pretty One's."* In D. Oliphant & R. Bradford (Eds.) Rossetti to Sexton: Six Women Poets at Texas, (pp.191-221). Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

What is most interesting, however, for our purposes is that even in Sexton's original handwritten draft, we can see how her writing is allowing her to work against the pull of her madness. Immediately evident is the fact that the text on the nuns is drafted twice. That is, she has not merely scratched out phrases and re-worded parts as in the rest of her draft, rather she has actually rewritten the entire segment two times. Already, then Sexton is attending to the image that will permit her to speak of the things that "remain mute inside:" "I keep trying to force myself to speak of the things that remain mute inside. My poems only come when I have almost lost the ability to utter a word. To speak in a way of the unspeakable" (L. Sexton, 1991, p. 171). That is, she is attempting to move outside the tightly circumscribed circle in which her thoughts usually travel toward that which she does not yet know.

If we look closely at one of her handwritten texts, we can see how even in this early draft she struggles to move past her characteristic perceptions. Consider this segment:

> I watch how they wear their deep clothes,
> (how their deep clothes cover and cover them)
> that cover them closely,
> I see the wind suck up those veils
> without discrimination
> and I see suddenly that ankle and that chain
> and see

each dark cloth go square from its post
like the American flag in a picture
or now fat like the bowl of a sail
Look! WINGS! I see now It's
out from their unknown bodies are wings
wings caught from the blouse of their impassive shoulder
hidden wings, working as black works, for dear magic.
(see Appendix S, p.202)

The first image Sexton deploys in an effort to understand her own fascination with the nun's clothes returns her to a familiar theme. What might protect, "deep clothes that cover and cover," cannot: for the wind "disregards" them. But this theme is not the one Sexton is driven to pursue. She sets it down only to pass over it, to a more pressing concern: the myriad forms of the clothes. She is captivated by the different shapes their black habits assume: an American flag, a sail, wings, "Each dark cloth going square from its post, like the American flag, or now fat like the bowl of a sail/ Look! WINGS! I see now its/ wings ..."(see Appendix S, p.202). Capitalizing "WINGS," her handwriting itself registers her excitement. She has uncovered in the source image of an entirely different thematic focus. No longer obsessed with thoughts of attack and defense (clothes that cover or fail to cover), Sexton is taken aback, gladdened, surprised that these apparently docile creatures, "their faces poked out from their hoods like good babies," are gifted with the marvelous faculty of flight.

This shift from obsessing about doom to marveling over the nun's wings reflects a significant psychological leap. For the woman who describes herself as "running like little black sambo into smaller and smaller circles around my ego"[28] this shift constitutes a reversal (L. Sexton, 1991, p.239). Rather than circling round, she is now looking out of herself toward a sight that opens her toward what she is not. Recall for a moment, how the early stanzas of the final poem suggest that Sexton generally exists in a closed insular realm, ruled by cruelty and dread. What threatens cannot help but descend on what is vulnerable. Moreover, this cycle mercilessly repeats itself for Sexton dwells in the sealed realm of her own mad introversion ("these are my eyes the orange letters that spell/ ORIENT..") To wonder at the sight of the nuns, to see in their windblown habits--wings, to find in their impassive bodies--flight, is to break from that realm. For to follow this image, she must subordinate herself as she lives, to herself as she might be. Derealizing herself ("Dear God, although I am very sad, could you please let these four nuns loosen from their leather boots to rise up..") in an effort to uncover the shape of the poem, Sexton escapes the inescapable. She escapes herself.

To look at the gradual process of her revision is to see this "becoming"unfold. Once she has fastened onto the wings as a key image, she attempts to make the wonder of these wings clear by focusing on the clothes themselves. How strange and wondrous that flight inheres in their deep clothes. How improbable that wings should appear from impassive shoulders, or unknown bodies. How fantastic that these wings should offer "dear magic" (see Appendix S, p.202).

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[28] Letter to Anne Clarke, April 8, 1964.

Again, though, she must revise. For ultimately, Sexton does not want to figure the nuns as impassive bearers of magical winged clothes. Rather she wants their flight to be an outcome of their own agency. As her handwritten note on the bottom of one of the typed drafts explains: "I am not imploring God to let them loose, that is set them free.. I am asking that they be permitted to loosen themselves.."(see Appendix S, p.224, for complete manuscript). Slowly then she cuts away these elaborations, until she arrives at her final draft which reads:

> without discrimination
> the wind pulls the skirts
> of their arms
> like wings
> Almost undressed
> I see what remains,
> that holy wrist,
> that ankle
> that chain.

In this final draft, wings are mentioned but hardly celebrated. Rather the wonder of these wings is re-absorbed into the poem and appears in later stanzas as the wonder of what "my dark girls" can fly over: "the drowning winds that take the toes and ears of the rider." Her dark girls can rise over these erotic winds.

They can move moreover, into a leeward air that does not undress or ravish but merely floats them: "there go my dark girls,/ their dresses puff/ in the leeward air." This ascent gives cause to marvel for it places the nuns in a realm where they are no longer subject to an aggressive sexuality. The wonder of these wings has been re-located so that it resides within the nuns and the act of their ascent.

This vision transfigures the author in at least two ways. First, for Anne Sexton to be capable of surprise (Sexton expresses surprise as she sees not a flag, not a sail, but WINGS!) is to be incapable of suicide. To be capable of surprise, Sexton must permit life to show her what she does not yet know she is, or loves, or wants to be. Anne Sexton in life continually seeks a more intimate and exciting lover who can subsume her and on whom she can be utterly dependent. Anne Sexton the poet, the phenomenological creator, finds excitement in the vision of female self-reliance. To make present in herself an openness such that she can aspire to something utterly new and unanticipated, is to make present in herself a desire to live. And it is perhaps referring to such an experience that Sexton declares: "Poetry and poetry alone has saved my life"[29] (L. Sexton, 1991, p.81). Secondly, to revise this wonder into a kind of grace that relieves her of her own sexual aggression is to momentarily make available to her another way of "wearing her womanhood,"[30] Sexton is a woman for whom seduction is a primary way of forming relationship. Upon first meeting her psychiatrist, Dr. Martin Orne, for example, she concedes perhaps there is one thing she's good at: seducing men. Later having become a poet, she reflects again on her promiscuity. In May of 1961 she tells Dr. Orne of an incident in which fellow poet Anthony Hecht gallantly refuses her sexual advances. Explaining her need to pursue him she said, "It's not that I want to go to bed with him; I want to be sure he loves me. This (wanting) is like pills or drugs but much more complex" (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 147). In fact, at the time she writes *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* her aggressive sexuality is in full view. Her biographer, Diane Middlebrook, indicates she has had three extramarital affairs: 1958 with Jerry, a fellow student at Boston Center for Education, 1959 with George Starbuck, fellow poet, 1960 with James Wright, fellow poet and has attempted to initiate at least two others: 1958 with Robert Lowell, poet and mentor, 1961 with Anthony Hecht, fellow poet. To fathom a realm in which her sexuality would be neutralized, in which it would present merely as leeward wind, is to radically re-vision her womanhood. *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound* suggests that nuns who ascend through a leeward air can survive without concrete happiness, (smiles, hands shoes) or material sustenance (they drink the sky.) Briefly then, Sexton as artist envisions a condition in which her soul might be opened and her body calmed. For Anne Sexton the suburban housewife who is perpetually hungering for nurturance and sexuality--or perhaps nuturance in the form of sex--such a condition is an emancipation of the highest order.

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[29] Letter to De Snodgrass June 9, 1959.

[30] Letter to De Snodgrass, November 15, 1958: "I have no place loving you and because I let you be my god for a while, I was in need of loving, of giving love, and not wise, nor cagey, nor -- just walking around waring my womanhood and trying to keep us all sane" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.41).

Revision: Cutting the manuscript

So far we have traced a type of revision in which Sexton successively builds toward a particular image, honing it, refining it until it captures her meaning. But this is not by any means all that Sexton's revisions entail. A significant part of Sexton's drafting process also involves cutting away. In this next section, I would like to examine Sexton's slow progression toward emancipation by looking at what she finally does not write.

Two kinds of text in particular interest me here. One is her maudlin sentimental verse (intended for her lover audience) and the other is her morbid malevolent verse (intended, it seems, for herself). Sexton's maudlin verse, though bad, is the less psychologically dangerous of the two. Consider the following text and its revision:

> Oh goddamn, my heart, I'm
> riding backwards
> Oh, is it too sad to look at this?
> Oh Dearest you--
> hear my eyes?
> --I love you,! (see Appendix S, p.204)

or her revision of this text:

B.S. I cannot sing about love
I'm riding backwards,
watching the land I've left
as the long angry wake
of my boat connects us;
the color,
if you stopped time
of marble. (see Appendix S, p.208)

Next to the top line of the revised version of this stanza, Sexton scribbles "B.S." (I read this as: "bull shit" in the context of her free use of expletives). Her note suggests that in looking again, she finds her persona's claim false, and hard to tolerate. To cut this text, is to momentarily rid herself of the Anne Sexton who is repeatedly getting caught in "costumes of her own making."[31] She is a fabricator. For a moment she sees herself as others see her. She is a woman who attempts to discourage her psychiatrist from taking a research leave by inventing a story about a childhood molestations at the hand of a family friend.[32] She is the woman who is so prone to hysterical display that her family suspects her of a ruse when she claims that poetry and therapy are crucial to her well being.[33] She is a woman who negotiated a reduced fee with her last psychiatrist by claiming she was solely responsible for both her daughters college educations. In truth, Kayo, her divorced husband, was paying tuition bills. Confessing what she called her "truth crimes," to her psychiatrist Dr. Orne in 1956, Sexton explained: "In fact, it comes down to the terrible truth that there is no true part of me...I am nothing, if not an actress off stage" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.62).

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[31] Letter to Joyce Carol Oates, "After all, it is my fault. I did write about it (being crazy) thoroughly, explored it so I made my own costume, so to speak, and at each reading I must step into it, althoguht it no longer fits, and I do everything within my power to act perfectly normal and charming and win them over" (L. Sexton, 1991, p. 396).

[32] At the end of April (1956) she (Anne Sexton) told him (Dr. Orne) a story (about being molested by an older man, a family friend, while swimming at Squirrel Island) that she knew she had made up on the spot" (Middlebrook, 1991, p.62).

[33] Middlebrook reports how Kayo blew up one mornign when Sexton announced she was planning to attend the Antioch Writers Conference. He "told her that poetry was an indulgence, just as her psychiatry was an indulgence and he was tired fo trying to explain her selfish behavior

To cut these maudlin lines, an obvious enough choice even for the untrained eye, is more significant than it appears. To cut these lines entails taking her actress off stage and Sexton without the actress is at risk. The actress is powerful. The actress procures desirables for her. In her relations with men, for example, she explains to Dr.Orne that her seductive power arises from her neediness. Describing how this need serves she explains to Orne: "It's not that I'm beautiful; its just that I can make some men fall in love with me, ... if I want to push it I just say, 'I need you' " (Middlebrook, 1991, p.148). To figure herself as a woman who marks her own path ("I have made it this far as I said I would") and who endorses other women who do the same ("See how my dark girls sally forth...") is to momentarily stand ready to give up the sure devise. By reconsidering her spontaneous text, by reflecting, she is able to restrain. Driven by the desire to make art, to write more than she knows she knows, to find the true life behind the other life, she can make "some form of integrity." As Sexton herself explains, "The effort," in writing a poem, " is to try to get some form of integrity when you write a poem, some whole life lived..."(Marx, 1985, p.82). Exerting

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to boths sides of the family (Middlebrook, 1991, p. 79).

this effort in the process of revision, Anne Sexton can overcome her immediate preferences and constitute her subjectivity in another manner.

In editing her other text, the text I describe as her morbid, malevolent verse, Sexton's task is the similar but decidedly more difficult. Though she says of her seductiveness "I'm going to die of this, its a disease," (Middlebrook, 1991, p.148) her seductiveness is not finally her most treacherous psychological foe. More terrible than her aggressive sexuality is her despair and rage. We see this condition expressed in what I have termed her morbid, malevolent verse.

In this verse, Sexton proffers a vision in which the persona is incarcerated in an evil, cancerous realm. In such a world the question of female agency is obviated. Agency itself has long since been dismissed. In addressing her listener, "Dearest you," the speaker is not so much crying out for help--the world as she depicts it is beyond salvation--rather she is merely offering herself up as piteous. Over time, such a purpose wears thin. Her writing itself a dubious act.

Enroute to her final poem, Sexton develops a stanza of this kind that in its most elaborated version reads:

Dearest you
outside the distortions
of my overanalyzed head
I listen
to the drowned wood of the wharf
the bad rhythm of its oily water

where it swells morbidly
a thick bubble
like a tumor
Over me I hear the sun hiss
the sky is without gulls
or humor. (see Appendix S, p.215)

What is interesting about this stanza is that it was not in Sexton's initial handwritten draft. She actually writes it *into* the poem during the revision process. Moreover, she is reluctant to let it go. In the course of eleven drafts of this text, she will work that stanza over six times in an effort to make it fit (see Appendix S, pp.206,211,215,217-219). What this fact suggests is that her rewriting does not always constitute revision. For although this text arises as Sexton reconsiders her spontaneous initial draft, and although it is reworked, elaborated, and edited, it is finally a text whose meaning is circumscribed. Sexton can use neither rhythm nor metaphor to open up other possible meanings. The more fastidiously she describes her horror, the more fixed it becomes. Actual re-vision is not possible in such a text because there is nothing to be discovered, there is nothing yet to be found out. The woman this verse posits is the very woman Sexton's letters show her to be. Consider a letter Sexton writes to Erica Jong, June 1974, urging Jong to ignore critics and get on with her writing. "You must write," Sexton insists, so that "others can crawl closer to the truth ... the listener, awaits trembling on the sore hole of his own abyss and he needs you!"(L. Sexton, 1991, p. 414). The reader figured in this letter, "trembling on the sore hole of his own abyss," is none other than the persona who stands under "sky that is without gulls or humor." Both are but Sexton as she lives.

What distinguishes this malevolent text from her maudlin text, however, is that her rewrites of the former show so little capacity to reflect. Though she looks again upon her morbid text, she does not do so with insight. She does not do so from another perspective. She does not, in short, write beside this text "B.S." Her more limited ability to critique the malevolent text can be seen if we look at both texts surface in the final poem. Where her maudlin verse appears as a parenthetical statement, "Dear God, although I am very sad, could you please let these nuns loosen..." her malevolent verse appears as an entire stanza: "Still/ I have eyes/ these are my eyes, the orange letters that spell/ ORIENT on the life preserver that hangs at my knees, the cement life boat that wears its dirty canvas coat, the faded sign that reads "KEEP OFF./ Oh, all right, I say, I'll save myself."

Doing much the same work as the malevolent text from her manuscript, this stanza in the final poem presents a world that is hostile. What we see then is that even in her finished work, Sexton has not been able to revise or re-see her world. Rather, she has merely been able, for the sake of the flow of the poem to truncate her description of it. She has omitted the notion that the world is diseased, tumor-like. But even this concession was hard to exact as Sexton's six drafts indicate.

What this examination of her manuscript allows us to see, then, is that Sexton's proclivity to set down her corrupted soul in its full denigration does not rise up suddenly in her late years and overwhelm her. Rather it exists ever-present in her work as in her living. Consider this line from a collection of poems written in 1964: "The trees are whores yet you place me under them. The sun is poison yet you toss me under it like a rose" (see Appendix W for complete poem) (A. Sexton, 1981, p.568). What changes at the end of Sexton's life is that she no longer has the strength to make something else exist as well,[34] to "forge it into being."[35] For as Dufrenne puts it: "the true problem of art is an ontological problem... The artist wishes to make something exist and not to make it beautiful" (Dufrenne, 1973, p. 144).

Revision required of Sexton tremendous exertion. Compelling as the possibility of artistic transfiguration is, the act of subordinating herself to poetry was not an easy one. Her mad self was constantly in the fore pressing for supremacy. In fact, when describing her writing process to interviewer Patricia Marx, Sexton speaks of it as a "fight,"

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[34] What Sexton produces once she has discarded "anything that is too interruptive or costly emotionally," is but more malevolent verse. In the last 3 years of her life, for example, she writes *45 Mercy Sreet* (1976), a volume that is dominated by the notion that a given place, or body or social arrangement (such as marriage) has become perverted, diseased, infected and as such is unendurable. In "The Love Plant," a flowering plant invades the narrator growing into her lungs, heart and throat. Attempts to destroy it are futile and the malignant green "hisses on": "I light matches and put them in my mouth,/and my teeth melt but the greenery hisses on" (A. Sexton, 1976, p.528). In "Landscape Winter," the surrounding snow is like a drug addict: "The snow far off on the pine nesting into the needls like addicts into their fix"(A. Sexton, 1976, p.511). In "The Money Swing" what might comfort, a smile, soon reveals itself as an inflamed affliction: "I know your smile will develop a boil"(A. Sexton, 1976, p.488). Repeatedly the seemingly benign, a green plant, the far off snow, a smile, is actually ripe with insideous afflictions. The sheer fixedness of these images, their consistent reiteration of but one theme, helps us grasp the oppressive, perseverative mind state under which the mad Anne Sexton labors.

[35] Letter to Jonathan Korso: August 12, 1965, "the discipline, the reworking, the forging into being is the stuff of poetry" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.267).

> For one lyric poem I rewrote about 300 typewritten pages. You have to look back at all those bad words, bad metaphors, everything stated wrong and then see how it came into being, the slow progress of it, because you are always fighting to find out what it is you want to say (Marx, 1985, p.73).

The fight to stay the poem was life for Sexton. And yet as she enters into middle age her energy flags. This fight becomes harder to sustain. Earlier in her life while many of her ferocious needs for love and care were being addressed--while her house was cleaned by her maid, her children tended by her mother-in-law, and her household managed primary by her husband, her ego nurtured by friends, lovers, colleagues and successive successes--in this early phase, she could marshal the requisite energy to master the poem. Her intense drive in combination with these support systems made such mastery possible. But as she ages, as loneliness, alcoholism, sleeping pills and tranquilizers eviscerate her already compromised resources, she cannot. Revealing the thin strand of life force on which she must sustain herself as she nears the end of her life, Sexton writes to Donald Hall on December 12, 1973 less than a year before she dies: "But there's just so much time and if one feels committed, as I do, to writing SOMETHING--for good or bad--then one must absolutely discard anything that is too interruptive or costly emotionally" (L. Sexton, 1991, p.401).

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herself and having herself as her only terminus, she is temporarily able to realize herself as another.[37] At least while she writes in this revisionary mode, she is, like the nuns, able to drink the sky. Infused with he fullness (that is a direct counterpart of her openness) all the living earth becomes available to her. So it is that as the phenomenological creator, she can, as she writes "with used furniture make a tree" (see Appendix X for complete poem) (A.Sexton, 1962, p.88). That is, she can out of that which is inert, madness, make that which is alive, a poem. As she revises, so can she live.

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[37] "To reflect is to become a voice, rather than an echo" (Dufrenne, 1973, p. 371). To revise is to compose rather than repeat.

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A Retrospective Anne Sexton: the Writer and the Suicide

Looking back at Anne Sexton as I have encountered her in her art, I see in part how it was that poetry both saved and failed to save. I see somewhat unexpectedly for example, that Anne Sexton the suicide can be found in her good and bad poetry alike. She is not simply someone made manifest by her late unrevised texts. She can be found in the manuscripts of *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound*, projecting a world in which the very sun hisses with animosity. She can be found in *Pain for a Daughter*, as a mother whose narcissistic love will not allow her daughter's life to exceed her own. She can be found in *The Touch* elaborating her favorite death wish whereby the right touch arouses and subsumes her. Her face is always the same. Her gaze is turned inward. It is often malevolent and when this face bears the expression of love, it is turned either toward her own double image or toward that which promises to excite and obliterate her. To see her in her work suggests that though she ascribed to poetry the power to save ("I could be sitting around thinking about ways to kill myself but I would rather be writing poetry") poetry did not actually alter her (D. Middlebrook, 1991,p.52).

What poetry did was it provided her with the specialized conditions she needed so she could try to refigure herself--and try she did. The fierce determination with which she worked marked her profound desire to establish herself as a subject-in-progress. Describing this endeavor, Sexton explains, "I will take a crowbar and pry out the broken pieces of God in me. Just like a jigsaw puzzle, I will put Him together with the patience of a chess player" (see Appendix R for complete poem) (A. Sexton, 1981, p.418). For a time despite her meager emotional resources, she could marshal the strength and the patience to pry God out of her. It did happen that in her poetic texts, she could revitalize her symbolic capacities. But the work she had to do was immense. And if, as it appears, she never managed to overthrow the stories she commonly ascribed to herself, she did manage to augment them. Perhaps then what poetry did was not save her but salvage her. Perhaps, as Juhasz (1988) proposes, it allowed her to "hold death at bay" (p.333).[38] It sustained her as a subject-in-crisis. It brought forth a strength and patience that no other aspect of her life could elicit.

Let us accept for a moment that this is how poetry served Anne Sexton, and let me now turn to the question of how poetry provided Anne with such a place. I propose that the power of Sexton's poetry comes out of the silences, the resonances and the untranslatable images with which she worked. It is from these materials that she shapes a presence in *Pain for a Daughter*, forms for a body in *The Truth the Dead Know* and renders a vision of female emancipation in *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound*. To understand why this might be so I turn to Derrida's (1995) *The Gift of Death*.[39] In this volume, Derrida proposes that it is in our secrets and our silences that we exist as singular, unique, responsible beings rather than in our words. Countering Taylor's (1989) claim that we make ourselves in language, Derrida suggests that when we give ourselves over to language, we relieve ourselves of our individuality. We make of ourselves something shared.

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[38] Juhasz, S. (1988) "The Excitable Gift": The Poetry of Anne Sexton. In S.E. Colburn (Ed.) Anne Sexton Telling the Tale. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

[39] Derrida, J. (1995) The Gift of Death. (D. Willis Trans.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

> ...as soon as one speaks, as soon as one enters the medium of language, one loses that very singularity...The first effect or first destination of language therefore involves depriving me of or delivering me from, my singularity. By suspending my absolute singularity in speaking, I renounce at the same time my liberty and my responsibility. Once I speak I am never and no longer myself, alone and unique. It is a very strange contract--both paradoxical and terrifying-- that binds infinite responsibility to silence and secrecy (p.60).

Might it be that poetry salvages Anne Sexton because as she puts herself into words she also bequeaths on herself silences and secrets? So we find her present in her resonances and embodied by her lyricism.

Consider furthermore, what Derrida's claim might mean for the phenomenological creator. Dufrenne (1973) explains that space is "designated, outlined by turning toward something which we are not and preparing to receive it. By opening ourselves up that which we are not" p. 244.[40] This opening is also always a committing according to Dufrenne. Anne Sexton's poetry both commits and opens her. In casting the poem, she shapes a space for herself not only in the silences and the unarticulable sentience that surround her words, but also in the act with which she makes ready to write. By turning toward the call of the work, by searching for that which she cannot yet find, she creates a space that opens out onto a secret. Standing ready in this manner to receive what is given to her by composing, Anne has withdrawn, she has made ready. Perhaps, looking out over the expanse that is but herself unrevealed, she exists in her absolute singularity.

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[40] Dufrenne, M. (1973). The phenomenology of aesthetic experience. (E. S. Casey, A. A. Anderson, W. Domingo, L. Jacobson Trans.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press. (Original work published in 1953)

Appendixes

Appendix A

Pain for a Daughter

Blind with love, my daughter
has cried nightly for horses,
those long-necked marchers and churners
that she has mastered, any and all,
reigning them in like a circus hand--
the excitable muscles and the ripe neck;
tending this summer, a pony and a foal.
She who is too squeamish to pull
a thorn from the dog's paw,
watched her pony blossom with distemper,
the underside of the jaw swelling
like an enormous grape.
Gritting her teeth with love,
she drained the boil and scoured it
with hydrogen peroxide until pus
ran like milk on the barn floor.

Blind with loss all winter,
in dungarees, a ski jacket and a hard hat,
she visits the neighbors' stable,
our acreage not zoned for barns;
they who own the flaming horses
and the swan-whipped thoroughbred
that she tugs at and cajoles,
thinking it will burn like a furnace
under her small-hipped English seat.

Blind with pain she limps home.
The thoroughbred has stood on her foot.
He rested there like a building.
He grew into her foot until they were one.
The marks of the horseshoe printed
into her flesh, the tips of her toes
ripped off like pieces of leather,
three toenails swirled like shells
and left to float in blood in her riding boot.

Blind with fear, she sits on the toilet,

her foot balanced over the washbasin,
her father, hydrogen peroxide in hand,
performing the rites of the cleansing.
She bites on a towel, sucked in breath,
sucked in and arched against the pain,
her eyes glancing off me where
I stand at the door, eyes locked
on the ceiling, eyes of a stranger,
and then she cries...
Oh my God help me!
Where a child would have cried *Mama!*
Where a child would have believed *Mama!*
she bit the towel and called on God
and I saw her life stretch out...
I saw her torn in childbirth,
and I saw her, at that moment,
in her own death and I knew that she
knew.

Appendix B

Double Image

1.
I am thirty this November.
You are still small, in your fourth year.
We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,
flapping in the winter rain,
falling flat and washed. And I remember
mostly the three autumns you did not live her.
They said I'd never get you back again.
I tell you what you'll never really know:
all the medical hypothesis
that explained my brain will never be as true as these
struck leaves letting go.

I, who chose two times
to kill myself, had said your nickname
the mewling months when you first came;
until a fever rattled
in your throat and I moved like a pantomime
above your head. Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame,
I heard them say, was mine. They tattled
like green witches in my head, letting doom
leak like a broken faucet;
as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet,
an old debt I must assume.

Death was simpler than I'd thought.
The day life made you well and whole I let the witches take away my guilty soul.
I pretended I was dead
until the white men pumped the poison out,
putting me armless and washed through the rigmarole
of talking boxes and the electric bed.
I laughed to see the private iron in that hotel.
Today the yellow leaves
go queer. You ask me where they go. I say today believed
in itself, or else it fell.

Today, my small child, Joyce,
love your self's self where it lives.
There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,
why did I let you grow
in another place. You did not know my voice

when I came back to call. All the superlatives
of tomorrow's white tree and mistletoe
will not help you know the holidays you had to miss.
The time I did not love
myself, I visited your shoveled walks; you held my glove.
There was new snow after this.

2.
They sent me letters with news
of you and I made moccasins that I would never use.
When I grew well enough to tolerate
myself, I lived with my mother. Too late,
too late, to live with your mother, the witches said.
But I didn't leave. I had my portrait
done instead.

Part way back from Bedlam
I came to my mother's house in Gloucester,
Massachusetts. And this is how I came
to catch at her; and this is how I lost her.
I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said.
And she never could. She had my portrait
done instead.

I lived like an angry guest,
like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child.
I remember my mother did her best.
She took me to Boston and had my hair restyled.
Your smile is like your mother's, the artist said.
I didn't seem to care. I had my portrait
done instead.

3.
All that summer sprinklers arched
over the seaside grass.
We talked of drought
while the salt-parched
field grew sweet again. To help time pass
I tried to mow the lawn
and in the morning I had my portrait done,
holding my smile in place, till it grew formal.
Once I mailed you a picture of a rabbit
and a postcard of Motif number one,
as if it were normal
to be a mother and be gone.

They hung my portrait in the chill
north light, matching
me to keep me well.
Only my mother grew ill.
She turned from me, as if death were catching,
as if death transferred,
as if my dying had eaten inside her.
That August you were two, but I timed my days with doubt.
On the first September she looked at me
and said I gave her cancer.
They carved her sweet hills out
and still I couldn't answer.

4.
That winter she came
part way back
from her sterile suite
of doctors, the sea-sick
cruise of the X-ray,
the cells' arithmetic
gone wild. Surgery incomplete,
the fat arm, the prognosis poor, I heard
them say.

During the sea blizzards
she had her
own portrait painted.
A cave of a mirror
placed on the south wall;
matching smile, matching contour.
And you resembled me; unacquainted
with my face, you wore it. But you were mine
after all.

I wintered in Boston,
childless bride,
nothing sweet to spare
with witches at my side.
I missed your babyhood,
tried a second suicide,
tried the sealed hotel a second year.
On April Fool you fooled me. We laughed and this
was good.

5.
I checked out for the last time
on the first of May;
graduate of the mental cases,
with my analyst's okay,
my complete book of rhymes,
my typewriter and my suitcases.

All that summer I learned life
back into my
seven rooms, visited the swan boats,
the market, answered the phone,
served cocktails as a wife
should, made love among my petticoats

and August tan. And you came each
weekend. But I lie.
You seldom came. I just pretended
you, small piglet, butterfly
girl with jelly bean cheeks,
disobedient three, my splendid

stranger. and I had to learn
why I would rather
die than love, how your innocence
would hurt and how I gather
guilt like a young intern
his symptoms, his certain evidence.

That October day we went
to Gloucester the red hills
reminded me of the dry red fur fox
coat I played in as a child; stock-still
like a bear or a tent,
like a great cave laughing or a red fur fox.

We drove past the hatchery,
the hut that sells bait,
past Pigeon Cove, past the Yacht Club, past Squall's
Hill, to the house that waits
still, on the top of the sea,
and two portraits hang on opposite walls.

6.
In north light, my smile is held in place,

the shadow marks my bone.
What could I have been dreaming as I sat there,
all of me waiting in the eyes, the zone
of the smile, the young face,
the foxes snare.

In south light, her smile held in place,
her cheeks wilted like a dry
orchid; my mocking mirror, my overthrown
love, my first image. She eyes me from that face,
that stony head of death
I had outgrown.

The artist caught us at the turning;
we smiled in our canvas home
before we chose our foreknown separate ways.
The dry red fur fox coat was made for burning.
I rot on the wall, my own
Dorian Gray.

And this was the cave of the mirror,
that double woman who stares
at herself, as if she were petrified
in time -- two ladies sitting in umber chairs.
You kissed your grandmother
and she cried.

7.
I could not get you back
except for weekends. You came
each time, clutching the picture of a rabbit
that I had sent you. For the last time I unpack
your things. We touch from habit.
The first visit you asked my name.
Now you stay for good. I will forget
how we bumped away from each other like marionettes
on strings. It wasn't the same
as love, letting weekends contain
us. You scrape your knee. You learn my name,
wobbling up the sidewalk, calling and crying.
You call me mother and I remember my mother again,
somewhere in greater Boston, dying.

I remember we named you Joyce
so we could call you Joy.

You came like an awkward guest
that first time, all wrapped and moist
and strange at my heavy breast.
I needed you. I didn't want a boy,
only a girl, a small milky mouse
of a girl, already loved, already loud in the house
of herself. We named you Joy.
I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind me.
And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure
nor soothe it. I made you to find me.

Appendix C

Keeping the City

Unless the Lord keepeth the city, the watchman
guardeth in vain--John F. Kennedy's unspoken words
in Dallas on November 23, 1963.

Once in August,
head on your chest,
I heard winds
battering up the place,
something inside trying to fly out
and I was silent
and attentive,
the watchman.
I was your small public,
your small audience
but it was you that was clapping,
it was you untying the snarls and knots,
the webs, all bloody and gluey;
you with your twelve tongues and twelve wings
beating, wresting, beating, beating
your way out of childhood,
that airless net that fastened you down.

Since then I was more silent
though you had gone miles away,
tearing down, rebuilding the fortress.
I was there
but could do nothing
but guard the city
lest it break.
I was silent.
I had the strange idea I could overhear
but that your voice, tongue, wing
belonged solely to you.
The Lord was silent too.
I did not know if he could keep you whole,
where I, miles away, yet head on your chest,
could do nothing. Not a single thing.

The wings of the watchman,
if I spoke, would hurt the bird of your soul
as he nested, bit, sucked, flapped.
I wanted him to fly, burst like a missile from your throat,

burst from the spidery-mother-web,
burst from Woman herself
where too many had laid out lights
that stuck to you and left a burn
that smarted into your middle age.

The city
of my choice
that I guard
like a butterfly, useless, useless
in her yellow costume, swirling
swirling around the gates.
The city shifts, falls, rebuilds,
and I can do nothing.
A watchman
should be on the alert,
but never cocksure.
And the Lord --
who knows what he keepeth?

Appendix D

The Fortress

while taking a nap with Linda

Under the pink quilted covers
I hold the pulse that counts your blood.
I think the woods outdoors
are half asleep,
left over from summer
like a stack of books after a flood,
left over like those promises I never keep.
On the right, the scrub pine tree
waits like a fruit store
holding up bunches of tufted broccoli.

We watch the wind from our square bed.
I press down my index finger --
half in jest, half in dread --
on the brown mole
under your left eye, inherited
from my right cheek: a spot of danger
where a bewitched worm ate its way through our soul
in search of beauty. My child, in July
the elves have been fed
secretly from a pool of beet-red dye.

And sometimes they are battle green
with trunks as we as hunter's boots,
smacked hard by the wind, clean
as oilskins. No,
the wind's not off the ocean.
Yes, it cried in your room like a wolf
and your pony tail hurt you. That was a long time ago.
The wind rolled the tide like a dying
woman. she wouldn't sleep,
she rolled there all night, grunting and sighing.

Darling, life is not in my hands;
life with its terrible changes
will take you, bombs or glands,
your own child at
your breast, your own house on your own land.
Outside the bittersweet turns orange.

Before she died, my mother and I picked those fat
branches, finding orange nipples
on the gray wire strands.
We weeded the forest, curing trees like cripples.

Your feet thump-thump against my back
and you whisper to yourself. Child,
what are you thinking? What pact
are you making?
What mouse runs between your eyes? What ark
can I feel for you when the world goes wild?
The woods are underwater, their weeds are shaking
in the tide; birches like zebra fish
flash by in a pack.
Child, I cannot promise that you will get your wish.

I cannot promise very much.
I give you the images I know.
Lie still with me and watch.
A pheasant moves
by like a seal, pulled through the mulch
by his thick white collar. He's on show
like a clown. He drags a beige feather that he removed,
one time, form an old lady's hat.
We laugh and we touch.
I promise you love. Time will not take away that.

Appendix E

Her Kind

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind.

I have found the warm caves in the woods,
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
closets, silks, innumerable goods;
fixed suppers for the worms and the elves:
whining, rearranging the disaligned.
A woman like that is misunderstood.
I have been her kind.

I have ridden in your cart driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor
where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
I have been her kind.

Appendix F

The Truth the Dead Know

For my mother, born March 1902, died March 1959
and my father, born February 1900, died June 1959

Gone, I say and walk from church,
refusing the stiff procession to the grave,
letting the dead ride alone in the hearse.
It is June. I am tired of being brave.

We drive to the Cape. I cultivate
myself where the sun gutters from the sky,
where the sea swings in like an iron gate
and we touch. In another country people die.

My darling, the wind falls in like stones
from the whitehearted water and when we touch
we enter touch entirely. No one's alone.
Men kill for this, or for as much.

And what of the dead? They lie without shoes
in their stone boats. They are more like stone
than the sea would be if it stopped. They refuse
to be blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone.

Appendix G

The Touch

For months my hand has been sealed off
in a tin box. Nothing was there but subway railings.
Perhaps it is bruised, I thought,
and that is why they have locked it up.
But when I looked in it lay there quietly.
You could tell time by this, I thought,
like a clock, by its five knuckles
and the thin underground veins.
It lay there like an unconscious woman
fed by tubes she knew not of.

The hand had collapsed,
a small wood pigeon
that had gone into seclusion.
I turned it over and the palm was old,
its lines traced like fine needlepoint
and stitched up into the fingers.
It was fat and soft and blind in places.
Nothing but vulnerable.

And all this is metaphor.
An ordinary hand--just lonely
for something to touch
that touches back.
The dog won't do it.
Her tail wags in the swamp for a frog.
I'm no better than a case of dog food.
She owns her own hunger.
My sisters won't do it.
They live in school except for buttons
and tears running down like lemonade.
My father won't do it.
He comes with the house and even at night
he lives in a machine made by my mother
and well oiled by his job, his job.
The trouble is
that I'd let my gestures freeze.
The trouble was not
in the kitchen or the tulips
but only in my head, my head.

Then all this became history.
Your hand found mine.
Life rushed to my fingers like a blood clot.
Oh, my carpenter,
the fingers are rebuilt.
They dance in the attic and in Vienna.
My hand is alive all over America.
Not even death will stop it,
death shedding her blood.
Nothing will stop it, for this is the kingdom
and the kingdom come.

Appendix H

Little Girl My String Bean, My Lovely Woman

My daughter, at eleven
(almost twelve), is like a garden.

Oh, darling! Born in that sweet birthday suit
and having owned it and known it for so long,
now you must watch high noon enter --
noon, that ghost hour.

Oh, funny little girl -- this one under a blueberry sky,
this one! How can I say that I've known
just what you know and just where you are?

It's not a strange place, this odd home
where your face sits in my hand
so full of distance,
so full of its immediate fever.
The summer has seized you,
as when, last month in Amalfi, I saw
lemons as large as your desk-side globe --
that miniature map of the world --
and I could mention, too,
the market stalls of mushrooms
and garlic buds all engorged.
Or I think even of the orchard next door,
where the berries are done
and the apples are beginning to swell.
And once, with our first backyard,
I remember I planted an acre of yellow beans
we couldn't eat.

Oh, little girl
my stringbean
how do you grow?
You grow this way.
You are too many to eat.

I hear as in a dream
the conversation of old wives
speaking of womanhood.

I remember that I heard nothing myself.
I was alone.
I waited like a target.

Let high noon enter --
the hour of the ghosts.
Once the Romans believed
that noon was the ghost hour,
and I can believe it, too,
under the startling sun,
and someday they will come to you
someday, men bare to the waist, young Romans
at noon where they belong,
with ladders and hammers
while no one sleeps.

But before they enter
I will have said,
Your bones are lovely,
and before their strange hands
there was always this hand that formed.

Oh, darling, let your body in
let it tie you in,
in comfort.
What I want to say, Linda,
is that woman are born twice.

If I could have watched you grow
as a magical mother might,
if I could have seen through magical transparent belly,
there would have been such ripening within:
your embryo,
the seed taking on its own,
life clapping the bedpost,
bones from the pond,
thumbs and two mysterious eyes,
the awfully human head,
the heart jumping like a puppy,
the important lungs,
the becoming --
while it becomes!
as it does now,
a world of its own
a delicate place.

I say hello
to such shakes and knockings and high jinks,
such music, such sprouts,
such dancing-mad-bears of music,
such necessary sugar,
such goings-on!

Oh, little girl,
my stringbean,
how do you grow?
You grow this way.
You are too many to eat.

What I want to say, Linda,
is that there is nothing in your body that lies.
All that is new is telling the truth.
I'm here, that somebody else,
an old tree in the background.

Darling,
stand still at your door,
sure of yourself, a white stone, a good stone --
as exceptional as laughter
you will strike fire
that new thing!

Appendix I

Talking Sheep

My life
has appeared unclothed in court,
detail by detail,
death-bone witness by death-bone witness,
and I was shamed at the verdict
and given a cut penny
and the entrails of a cat.
But nevertheless I went on
to the invisible priests,
confessing, confessing
through the wire of hell
and they wet upon me in that phone booth.

Then I accosted winos,
and derelicts of the region,
winning them over into the latrine of my details.
Yes. It was a compulsion
but I denied it, called it fiction
and then the populace screamed *Me too, Me too*
and I swallowed it like my fate.

Now,
in my middle age,
I'm well aware
I keep making statues
of my acts, carving them with my sleep --
of if it is not my life I depict
then someone's close enough to wear my nose --
My nose, my patrician nose,
sniffing at me or following theirs down the street.

Yet even five centuries ago this smelled queer,
confession, confession,
and your devil was thought to push their eyes
and all the eyes had seen (too much! too much!).
It was proof that you were a needle
to push into their pupils.
And the only cure for such confessions overhead
was to sit in a cold bath for six days,
a bath full of leeches, drawing out your blood
into which confessors had heated the devil in them,

inhabit them with their madness.

It was wise, the medical men said,
wise to cry *Baa* and be smiling into your mongoloid hood,
while you simply tended the sheep.
Or else to sew your lips shut
and not let a word or a deadstone sneak out.

I too have my silence,
where I enter another room
and am not only blind,
but speech has flown out of me
and I call it dead
though the respiration be okay.
Perhaps it is a sheep call?
I feel I must learn to speak the *Baa*
of the simple-minded, while my mind
drives into the multi-colored,
crowded voices,
cries for help, *My breasts are off me.*
The transvestite whispering to me,
over and over, *My legs are disappearing*
My mother, her voice like water,
saying *Fish are cut out of me*
My father,
his voice thrown into a cigar,
A marble of blood rolls into my heart.
My great aunt,
her voice,
thrown into a lost child at the freak's circus,
I am the flame swallower
but turn me over in bed
and I am the fat lady.

Yes! While my mind plays simple-minded,
plays dead-woman in neon,
I must recall to say
Baa
to the black sheep I am.

Baa. Baa. Baa.

Appendix J

Passion of the Mad Rabbit

While the carrots sang arias into the holy earth
and the snowmen turned into bronze weathervanes,
I underwent a removal, tearing skin off me,
plucking out the eyes like Ping-Pong balls,
squashing the shriek of my heart like a phone off the hook--
and as these phenomenon occurred, a fool walked straight into
        me.
He as named Mr. Rabbit. My own voice spoke to people,
anyone, friends, strangers on the street, saying.
"I am Mr. Rabbit." The flesh itself had become mad
and at three mirrors this was confirmed.

Next it was bad Friday and they nailed me up
like a scarecrow and many gathered eating popcorn, carrying
hymnals or balloons. There were three of us there,
though *they* appeared normal. My ears, so pink like powder,
were nailed. My paws, sweet as baby mittens, were nailed.
And my two fuzzy ankles. I said, "Pay no attention. I am
        crazy."
But some giggled and some knelt. My oxygen became tiny
and blood rang over and over in my head like a bell.
The others died, the luck of it blurting through them.
I could not. I was a silly broken umbrella
and oblivion would not kiss me. For three days it
was thus.

Then they took me down and had a conference.
It is Easter, they said, and you are the Easter Bunny.
Then they built a great pyre of kindling and laid me on top
and just before the match they handed me a pink basket
of eggs the color of the circus.
Fire lit, I tossed the eggs to them, *Hallelujah* I sang
        to the eggs,
singing as I burned to nothing in the tremor of the flames.
My blood came to a boil as I looked down the throat of
        madness,
but singing yellow egg, blue egg, pink egg, red egg, green
        egg.
Hallelujah, to each hard-boiled-colored egg.

In place of the Lord.
I whispered,
a fool has risen.

Appendix K

For John Who Begs Me Not to Inquire Further

Not that it was beautiful,
but that, in the end, there was
a certain sense of order there;
something worth learning
in that narrow diary of my mind
in the commonplaces of the asylum
where the cracked mirror
or my own selfish death
outstared me.
And if I tried
to give you something else,
something outside myself,
you would not know
that the worst anyone
can be, finally,
an accident of hope.
I tapped my own head;
it was glass, an inverted bowl.
At first it was private.
Then it was more than myself;
it was you, or your house
or your kitchen.
And if you turn away
because there is no lesson here
I will hold my awkward bowl,
with all its cracked stars shining
like a complicated lie,
and fasten a new skin around it
as if I were dressing an orange
or as strange sun.
Not that it was beautiful,
but that I found some order there.
There ought to be something special
for someone
in this kind of hope.
This is something I would never find
in a lovelier place, my dear,
although your fear is anyone's fear,
like an invisible veil between us all...
and sometimes in private,

my kitchen, your kitchen,
my face, your face.

Appendix G

Frenzy

I am not lazy.
I am on the amphetamine of the soul.
I am, each day,
typing out the God
my typewriter believes in.
Very quick. Very intense,
like a wolf at alive heart.
Not lazy.
When a lazy man, they say,
looks toward heaven,
the angels close the windows.

Oh angels,
keep the windows open
so hat I may reach in
and steal each object,
objects that tell me the sea is not dying,
objects that tell me the dirt has a life-wish,
that the Christ who walked for me,
walked on true ground
and that this frenzy,
like bees stinging the heart all morning,
will keep the angels
with their windows open,
wide as an English bathtub.

Appendix M

The Red Dance

There was a girl
who danced in the city that night
that April 22nd,
all along the Charles River.
It was as if one hundred men were watching
or do I mean one hundred eyes of God?
The yellow patches in the sycamores
glowed like miniature flashlights.
The shadows, the skin of them
were ice cubes that flashed
from the red dress to the roof.
Mile by mile along the Charles she danced
past the benches of lovers,
past he dogs pissing on the benches.
She had on red, red dress
and there was a small rain
and she lifted her face to it
and thought it part of the river.
And cars and trucks went by
on Memorial Drive.
And the Harvard students in the brick
hallowed houses studied Sappho in cement rooms.
And this Sappho danced on the grass
and danced and danced and danced.
It was death dance.
The Larz Anderson bridge wore its lights
and many cars went by,
and a few students strolling under
their Coop umbrellas.
And a black man who asked this Sappho the time,
the time, as if her watch spoke.
Words were turning into grease,
and she said, "Why do you lie to me?"
And the waters of the Charles were beautiful,
sticking out in many colored tongues
and this strange Sappho knew she would enter the lights
and be lit by them and sink into them.
And how the end would come --
it had been foretold to her --
she would aspirate swallowing a fish,
going down with God's first creature

dancing all the way.

Appendix N

Cigarettes and Whiskey and Wild, Wild Women

(from a song)

Perhaps I was born kneeling,
born coughing on the long winter,
born expecting the kiss of mercy,
born with a passion for quickness
and yet, as things progressed,
I learned early about the stockade
or taken out, the fume of the enema.
By two or three I learned not to kneel,
not to expect, to plant my fires underground
where none but the dolls, perfect and awful,
could be whispered to or laid down to die.

Now that I have written many words,
and let out so many loves, for so many,
and been altogether what I always was --
a woman of excess, of zeal and greed,
I find the effort useless,
Do I not look in the mirror,
these days,
and see a drunken rat avert her eyes?
Do I not feel the hunger so acutely
that I would rather die than look
into its face?

I kneel once more,
in case mercy should come
in the nick of time.

Appendix O

Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound

I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on
Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far
as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now
holding my wallet, my cigarettes
and my car keys
at 2 o'clock on a Tuesday
in August of 1960

Dearest,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened.
the sea is very old.
The sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage
or unusual hope,
grown rough and wrinkled
with incurable age.

Still,
I have eyes.
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver
that hangs by my knees;
the cement lifeboat that wears
its dirty canvas coat;
the faded sign that sits on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.

Over my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out

from under their habits,
as good as good babies who
have sunk into their carriages.
Without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts
of their arms.
Almost undressed,
I see what remains:
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
loosen from their leather boots
and their wooden chairs
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
out over this iron rail,
nodding their pink heads to one side,
flying four abreast
in the old-fashioned side stroke;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing without sound.

Dearest,
see how my dark girls sally forth,
over the passing lighthouse of Plum Gut,
its shell as rusty
as a camp dish,
as fragile as a pagoda
on a stone;
out over the little lighthouse
that warns me of drowning winds
that rub over its blind bottom
and its blue cover;
winds that will take the toes
and ears of the rider
or the lover.

There go my dark girls,

their dresses puff
in the leeward air.
Oh, they are lighter than flying dogs
or the breath of dolphins;
each mouth opens gratefully,
wider than a milk cup.
My dark girls sing for this.
They are going up.
See them rise
on black wings, drinking
the sky, without smiles
or hands
or shoes.
They call back to us
from the gauzy edge of paradise,
good news, good news.

Appendix P

Leaves that Talk

Yes.
It's May 20th and the leaves
green, green, wearing their masks
and speaking, calling out their Sapphic loves,
are here -- here -- here
calling out their death wish:

"Anne, Anne, come to us."
to die of course. Come when listening
to the voices of the doves
that burst in them and out of them.
I mean their veins, their hearts
who scare you and beguile you
and their woman apron lives,
their doves' arms flapping
from their cages, their brown stick branches.

I told someone once how they called to me,
sang to me, and that someone fled.
Now I will tell a priest
or is it a priestess?
Both, on and all and the same.
They call, though I sit here
sensibly behind my window screen.
They call, even if I'm pinned behind bars.
They call, they call their green death call.
They want me. They need me.
I belong lying down under them,
letting the green coffin fold and unfold
above me as I go out.

I flee. I flee.
I block my ears and eat salami.
I turn on THE song of THE LADY
but the leaves' song crawls through
and into it and mixes like a dream in a dream.
I confess. I confess.
They steam all summer,
calling dark and light and moonstone
and they do not shut up.
They do not.

It is bad for me, dear confessor,
and yet I am in love with it.
It has a body.
It has many bodies.
I do not believe in ghosts
(very much)
but I wonder if they aren't my whole past --
the generation of women, down the line,
the genealogical line right to the *Mayflower*,
and William Brewster and his woman
who rolled herself sick unto death
until she reached this promised land.
Oh well -- whoever my green girls are --
they *are*.

I dream its the fourth of July
and I'm having a love affair
with grandfather (his real birthday)
and that the leaves fall off,
clank, clank
crashing down like stones, New England
stones, one by one,
and in my dream
grandfather touches my neck and breast
and says, "Do not be afraid!
It's only the leaves falling!"
There are one hundred thousand woman cries,
tree by tree, and I scream out in my fear
that my green ladies are leaving,
my lovely obsessions,
and I need them.
I sob.
I wake up.
Kleenex.
Grandfather.

And, dear God
I am Rip van Winkle
It is six a.m.
July 5th,, 1974
and the branches are bare.
The leaves lie in green mounds,
like fake green snow huts.
And from the window as I peer out,

I see they have left their cages forever --
those wiry, spidery branches --
for me to people
someday soon when I turn green
and faithless to the summer.

Appendix Q

The Consecrating Mother

I stand before the sea
and it rolls and rolls in its green blood
saying, "Do not give up one god
for I have a handful."
The trade winds blew
in their twelve-fingered reversal
and I simply stood on the beach
while the ocean made a cross of salt
and hung up its drowned
and they cried *Deo Deo*.
The ocean offered them up in the vein of its might.
I wanted to share this
but I stood alone like a pink scarecrow.
The ocean steamed in and out,
the ocean gasped upon the shore
but I could not define her,
I could not name her mood, her locked-up faces.
Far off she rolled and rolled
like a woman in labor
and I thought of those who had crossed her,
in antiquity, in nautical trade, in slavery, in war.
I wondered how she had borne those bulwarks.
She should be entered skin to skin,
and put on like one's first and last cloth,
entered like kneeling your way into church,
descending into that ascension,
though he be slick as olive oil,
as she climbs each wave like an embezzler of white.
The big deep knows the law as it wears its gray hat,
though the ocean comes in its destiny,
with its one hundred lips,
and in moonlight she comes in her nudity,
flashing breasts made of milk water,
flashing buttocks made of unkillable lust,
and at night when you enter her
you shine like a neon soprano.

I am that clumsy human
on the shore
loving you, coming, coming,
going,

and wish to put my thumb on you
like The Song of Solomon.

Appendix R

The Civil War

I am torn in two
but I will conquer myself.
I will dig up the pride.
I will take scissors
and cut out the beggar.
I will take a crowbar
and pry out the broken
pieces of God in me.
Just like a jigsaw puzzle,
I will put Him together again
with the patience of a chess player.

How many pieces?
It feels like thousands,
God dressed up like a whore
in a slime of green algae.
God dressed up like an old man
staggering out of His shoes.
God dressed up like a child,
all naked,
even without skin,
soft as an avocado when you peel it
And others, others, others.

But I will conquer them all
and build a whole nation of God
in me -- but united,
build a new soul,
dress it with skin
and then put on my shirt
and sing an anthem,
a song of myself.

Appendix S

Manuscript: Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound

Please find attached the 36-page manuscript of *Letter Written on a Ferry While Crossing Long Island Sound.* (Manuscript obtained from the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin)

4
1" a Prayer for love

Letter Written On the Long Island Ferry

(Dearest ~~[illegible]~~ you)
My car & I are neatly packed aboard
the good ship ORIENT, that rode us forth
~~[illegible]~~ ~~[illegible]~~ until toward you,
splatted by the ~~[illegible]~~ blue sea,
riding toward you ~~across~~ the blue stomach
of this blue sheet.
Now I am going back ~~[illegible]~~
& I have ripped my hand
from your hand,
as I said I would,
and I have made it this far as this I said I would
& I am on the top deck now, at 2:00 o'clock
on August 2nd in 1960.
Oh, forget about heart!
& here are my eyes:
the orange letters spelling ORIENT
on ~~the~~ life preserver at my feet,
~~a~~ the cement life boat with its canvas,
its emblem faded saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right I say, I'll find some words
to save myself.
& as ~~[illegible]~~ over my right shoulder
I see 4 nuns ~~[illegible]~~ sit like a bridge club chatting,
~~[illegible] under their hoods~~
their faces poked out from under their hoods,

as good

smilingly

~~those~~ "god babies ~~[illegible]~~ look happily in
their ~~carriage~~
~~[illegible]~~ new carriage
~~[illegible]~~,

& I watch how they wear

~~like the~~ the bottoms of children,
~~they~~ ~~that~~ wear ~~their~~ ~~drapes~~ their deep clothes,
that the comes and comes; wind, ~~& dis[illegible]~~ ~~gained~~ to come to come (the comes, the comes)
as more it ~~perhaps (in)~~ ~~[illegible]~~ shamed in,
and I see that umbrella/& that chair,
& the dark cloth spring suddenly square
from its post like the American ~~flag~~
or, now, far like ~~a sail~~ the [illegible] & sail
& the! out from their unknown shoulders, ~~[illegible]~~
~~they~~ hot wings ~~[illegible]~~ from their shoulders
~~&~~ or the black ~~[illegible]~~, ~~& the~~ the black wings —

Oh God)

Although I am very sad,
please let those (rise) to rise over this
~~smooth~~ greasy ~~deck~~.
~~see~~ let them loosen ~~in the [illegible]~~ from their sheets,
& their wooden chairs,
~~[illegible]~~ or (over) across the terrible sail,
nodding their pink heads
~~to one side, in the rain~~
all at once; to one side,

Page 2

WINGS

9 pm
& as I turn, over my right shoulder,
~~I see~~, 4 nuns, who sit like a bridge club,
chatting to each other;
their faces poked out from under their ~~hoods~~ habits
as ~~good~~ good as good babies who have ~~sunk~~
happily into their moving carriages.
~~At~~ ~~and~~ I watch their deep clothes,
were meant → that ~~seem to~~ ~~miss~~ ~~cover~~ ~~each~~ seem to [illegible] covering closely;
~~untill~~
~~I watch the~~
~~swish~~
I see the wind suck up ~~their~~ these ~~dark~~ veils thick
without discrimination;
& I see suddenly ~~that~~ double & that again,
~~pushed~~ ~~outward~~ of disappearing ~~[illegible]~~ square
& ~~I~~ see ~~the~~ each dark clothes ~~[illegible]~~ from top to [illegible]
like the American flag in a picture
& now, fast, like the hood of a saint, ~~—~~
or ~~see~~ look! ~~looks~~ changed. I see now! It's WINGS!
out from their unknown bodies ~~[illegible]~~ over wings
wings caught from their ~~shoulders~~ blouse of their impressive
~~their hidden wings~~ hidden wings working,
as ~~the~~ black works (nouns), for ~~the~~ clear magic

Oh God, although I am very sad,
could you please let these nuns
loosen from their leather boots
& the sharp rings of their wooden chairs,

6

~~to rise over this gaping dusk)~~
out across the new (awful) sail
nodding their pink breasts,
all at once, to our seats, eating prayer
and let ~~the sea~~
~~[illegible]~~ (under that ~~the sea mist~~ lie
greater than glass) or harder, or a ~~[illegible]~~ diamond,
and let them be or the eyes of all the small fish greater than
~~looking up~~, who look up at me.

Oh Dearest! you, I am not a brave when I'm sad;
I lean my mouth ~~[illegible]~~ for you,
~~and yet I see these good ladies~~
~~fly out across us all,~~
~~across their sisters,~~

~~I~~ I am
surprised
to see that Jeanne is
still going on.

So I must

~~And~~ ~~now~~ save myself, my mouth, (eyes), for my
~~that talks to you~~, so I can ~~tell~~ give you
~~and watching~~ good ladies go up,
slipping, ~~[illegible]~~ passing high ~~[illegible]~~
of Plum but, ~~when~~ the shining winds ~~[illegible]~~
~~to~~ take ~~the~~ ~~[illegible]~~ & the land, too
Up game ~~[illegible]~~, a ~~[illegible]~~ house,
~~[illegible]~~ a stone,
~~and [illegible]~~ camp dusts
~~[illegible]~~

7

Last ~~[illegible]~~ 4/

204

Oh. god damn, my heart, I'm
riding backward —
& you see ~~the~~ wake runs out toward
(watch the land I've left)
your land, a color,
if you stopped time,
of marble,
deep with all ~~[illegible]~~ strange mixed
~~[illegible]~~ color of blue, the sea
as if ~~[illegible]~~ time the face of
Mary,
grown old & rough with age.
Or is it too sad, too look at this? or dreamy
Oh Damn you —
hear my eyes!
later, — I love you —
~~[illegible]~~ to see the mews
~~rise~~ flap ~~loosen~~ out into ~~line~~ above
the blue air, ~~a plus~~ of our blue shore
~~[illegible]~~,
speaking happily to the faces
who stay below —

as if there were a praying
as if they were . .

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY

Dearest you,
I am sotsurpcmsedhen Seem sad
that the ocean is still going on.
My car and I are neatly packed aboard
the big ship Orient that rode us both
toward you last week, splattered by the blue sanges,
riding toward you over the blue stones
of this blue street.

Now I am going back

Dearest you,

When I reached the whaff I was surprised
to see the ocean still going on.

Dearest you,
was
When I drove away, my mouth clooged with tears
and your last touch curled against my cheek,
remembering the night I ran toward death

Dearest you,
When I drove away from your face,
my mouth was clogged with tears
and your last touch curled on my cheek,
prayingnto the road

~~my heart smothered~~

~~my [illegible]~~

my

my heart ~~splinted~~ ~~pinned~~ that ~~rode~~
+ my heart ~~splintering~~ ~~pressed~~ across
against the splinters
~~on my chest~~ of my ribs
~~chest~~

Dearest you,
I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still
going on.
My car and I
are neatly backed aboard
the fat ship Orient, that rode
thatotode us both toward
you last month,
spattered by the blue sun,
riding toward you ~~[illegible]~~ wearing my hair fine
over the blue stones
of this blue street.

13 - 14

Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand
as I said I would
and I have made it this far,
as I said I would,
and I am on the top deck ~~[illegible]~~
now at 2:00 o'clock ~~[illegible]~~ holding my car keys
on a tuesday in Aggust
in 1960.

10.

Dearest you,
Outside the distortions
of my head, I/~~see~~/ watch listen
the drowned wood of the wark,
the bad rhythm of ~~its water~~ of its oily water
and up over ~~the shimmering~~ the guazy sun
the sky is without gulls
or humor.

Smoke Tumor

8

10?

~~complications~~
the sea swells
in morbidity, in
clots, bubbles,
~~its~~ its disease,
its tumor

These are my eyes:
the orange letters that
spell ORIENT on the life,
preserver that hangs by ~~my~~ knees;
at my side, the cement life
boat that wears a canvas coat
whth a faded sign ~~that says~~ [illegible]
KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.

10

sipping a cardboard cup
of ~~[illegible]~~ tea

Over my right shoulder
I find four nuns
who sit like a bridg club;
their faces poked out from under
their habits, as good
as good babies who
have sunk down into
their ~~w~~ carragies.
I watch their deep clothes.
flutter out.
O dearest you, ~~that~~ [illegible]
a [illegible], what good are clothes.
A dark cloth goes
O only the [illegible] are [illegible].

10

30

square, out from its post,
and the wind without discrimination
pulls the skirts of their arms
like wings,
wings at the blouse
of each black shoulder,
~~their// when [illegible]~~ that the [illegible]
and I see, suddenly,
that ankle ~~[illegible]~~
that chain.

& remain
11 - 5 ' 5

that [illegible]
God [illegible]
that [illegible]

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns loosen
from their leather boots,
loosen from their wooden chairs,
to rise
over this greasy deck,
over the metal rail,
nodding their four pink heads
all at once to one side,
their right arm straight
and then bending
as in the side stroke,
their mouths round
breathing together,
~~singing~~ ahmen. like fish
singing without sound

nodding their heads,
bowing on their
~~[illegible]~~
hips n loins

18

Then,
let the sea
be greater than grass,
or floating lumber,
or ~~opening of my man's mouth~~;
~~as~~ greater, than the eyes
of all the terrible fish
who wait for me.

9

Dearest you,
I will save myself
to tell you how my dark girls
~~dark girls~~ go up,
over the passing Light House
of Plum Gut, its shell
as rusty as a camp dish,
as fragile as a pagoda
on a stone.

15

There go my dark girls,
over the ~~light~~ house
that warns me of drowning winds
that will take the toes that large need for ~~lips~~ muscles,
and the ears of the rider
and the lover.

untended ~~[illegible]~~ the head ~~[illegible]~~ & harbor
+ the blue cove

~~Their plums are dragging~~
from their beds

Their plumes
are hanging and swinging
from their beds,
lighter than flying dogs
or dolphins,
~~their~~ mouths open~~ing~~ ~~gratefully~~ gratefully
~~for~~ something ~~to sing~~.
they sing something wider than a music [illegible] [illegible] ~~[illegible]~~ [illegible] [illegible]

7

BS I cannot sing ~~about love~~.
I'm riding backwards,
watching the land I've left
as the long angry wake
of my boat connects us;
the color,
if you stopped time,
of marble, ~~its veins still~~
Oh dearest you,
see my four dark girls
rise over this ~~and drop~~
~~off the edge of the sea~~

rise ~~over~~ the blue sun,
over the blue stones
of my blue street
& ~~and drop~~ over the edge.
~~of my vision~~.

10

Black wings ~~[illegible]~~ ~~[illegible]~~ each one drinking the sky
[illegible] [illegible] shows
calling & ~~[illegible]~~ back
to, good news, good news.

Oh, dearest you,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened
~~to the sea~~
The ocean is still going on
and my four dark girls
can not hear me rage.
~~and rage~~. Nothing has happened
The sea is ~~old~~ very old.
The sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or Hope,
grown rough and ~~wrinkled~~ shri~~vel~~led
with age.
Sick ~~[illegible]~~

12

Dearest you [illegible] love
[illegible] [illegible] love [illegible]

There go my dark girls,
their plumes hanging
from their beds.
Oh, they are lighter than flying dogs
or the breath of dolphins.
Each ~~Their~~ mouth~~s~~ opens gratefully,
wider than a milk cup.
My dark girls sing for this.
They are going up.

But I cannot sing.
I am riding backwards,
watching the land I've left,
watching the ragged wake
[illegible] that connects us
while these four nuns rise
on black wings, drinking
the sky, without smiles,
or hands or shoes.
They call back from the guazy edge
of ~~horizon~~ paradise,
Good news. Good news.

Dearest you,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened.
The ocean is still going on
despite ~~my four dark girls.~~ everything.
The sea is very old.
Dearest you,
the sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage
or unusual hope,
grown rough and wrinkled
with her terrible age.

There go my dark girls
their plumes swinging
like loose threads
from a ~~great~~ bobbin,

There go my dark girls
their plumes swinging
from their hard beds;
their plumes swinging
like loose threads
from a large bobbin;
their wings looser than
feathers torn from/~~the~~/
the down that flows
out of a milk wedds pod

shells

Stem

trembles

There go my dark girls,
their plumes swinging
from their hard beds,
like the soft down the sweeps
out of a milk weed's pod,

high button
large buttoned boots
loosen from their ~~leather boots~~
to ride out
over this greasy deck,
steering out over this iron rail, its
ıch ~~their~~/skirt~~s~~ sticked over ~~their feet~~/ legs
~~like/large glossy/tail/fins~~, like a glossy fan,
let them ride/~~out/into/the/east~~/
flying four abreast,
in the old fashioned side stroke;
each motth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing
without sound.

shadows are
lavender

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
loosen from their

[illegible]
their oiled
trembles

1

Dearest you,
I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
My car and I
are neatly packed aboard
the good ship Orient
that rode us both toward
you last month,
splattered by the blue sun,
riding toward you
on this same ~~wooden~~ steel seat,
[illegible] over the blue stones (rocks)
of this blue street.

14

Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand
as I said I would
and I have made it this far,
as I said I would
and I on on the top deck now,
holding my wallet and my car keys
~~and it is~~ 2:00 o'clock on
a tuesday in August
of 1960.

11 (lines)

Dearest you,
Outside the distortions
of my over anyalized head
I try to listen
to the drowned wood of the warf,
the bad rhythmn of its oily water
where it swells morbidly where a tumor
~~in~~ thick bubles, ~~its~~ disease
~~and it tumor~~
and ~~its~~ a ~~sympatomatic~~ tumor.
Over me I hear the sun hiss
and the sky is without gulls
or humor.

12 (more)

These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver
that hangs by its knees.
At my side
the cement life boat wears
its canvas coat.
A faded sign sits on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.

11

Over my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out frum under
their habits, as good
as those good babies who
have sunk down
into their carragies.
I watch their deep clothes
flutter and suck out.
Oh Dearest you,
think of goats, or mice
or lobster--- what good
are clothes? ~~Only the~~
Only the naked are devout. 13

I watch their deep clothes
~~and~~ dark cloth goes square,
out from its post.
~~The wind has no~~ discrimination
pulling the skirts
of their arms (like wings;) 20
wings at the blouse
of each black shoulder.
~~I see~~, suddenly,
~~that~~ ~~the bone~~ will remain,
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

Oh God,
although I am very sad
could you please let
these four nuns loosen
from their leather boots,
loosen from their wooden chairs,
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
over this iron rail,
nodding their four pink heads
all at once to one side,
their arms stroking the sky,
~~all~~ doing the side stroke ~~together~~,
their mouths round,
breathing together,
like fish, singing without sound.

Then,
let the sea
be greater than grass,
or packed field of floating lumber,
or greater than the place of
my man's ~~close~~ mouth,
let the sea
be greater than the eyes
of all the terrible fish who
wait for me.

31

Dearest you,
I will save myself
to tell you how my dark girls
have flown up over
the passing light house of Plum Gut,
its old shell as rusty
as a camp dish,
as fragile as a pagoda
on a stone.
There go my dark girls
o~~ver~~ the little light house
that warns me of drowning winds,
winds that pul~~ling~~ each other like muscle,
~~pushing~~ over the blind rocks
and their sweet blue cover; ~~pulling over the~~ the plain blue cover.
that pull
winds ~~that~~ ~~will~~ take the toes
and the ears of the rider
and the lover.

There go my dark girls,
their plumes hanging
~~and swinging~~
from their beds.
They are lighter than flying dogs
or ~~breathing~~ dolphins.
~~and each moth~~s opens gratefully
wider than a milk cup,
wings and mouth ~~[illegible]~~ing in unison.
My dark girls are going up. sing for him,
they are going up.

But I cannot sing.
I'm riding backwarrds,
watching again,
the land I've left
as the long ragged wake
of my boat connects us;
the color,
if you stopped time,
of marble. ~~Or~~ see,
dear~~est~~, dearest,
my four dark girls rise
on black wings, drinking
the sky, without smiles,
or hands or shoes.
calling back [illegible]

of marble. Or see, dearest you
~~Dearest you~~, how my four dark girls
rise into the blue sun,
over the blue stones
of my blue street;
they rise on black wings,
drinking the sky
without smiles, or hands
or hehoes,

Dearest you,
although everything has happened,
~~I suppose~~ nothing has happened.
The ocean is still going on
and my four dark girls have gone
~~would not really bother with my~~ talk.
The sea is very old.
~~Nothing has happened.~~
Dearest you,
the sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage
or unusual hope,
wrinkled
grown rough~~t~~ and ~~shrivled~~ ugly
~~with her age~~.
with her terrible age.
~~ugly~~

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE FERRY

Dearest you,
I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
My car and I
are neatly packed aboard
the good ship *Orient*
that rode us both toward
you last month,
splattered by the blue sun,
sitting on this same hard seat,
riding toward you over the blue stones
of this blue street.

Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far
as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now
holding my wallet, my cigarettes
and my car keys
at 2:00 o'clock on Tuesday
in August of 1960.

Dearest you,
outside the distortions
of my over analyzed head
I listen
to the drowned wood of the warf,
the bad rhythm of its oily water
where it swells morbidly,
a thick bubble,
like a tumor.
Over me I hear the sun hiss
and the sky is without gulls
or humor.

Dearest you,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened.
The sea is very old.
The sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage
or unusual hope,
grown rough and wrinkled
with her terrible age.

Still, I have eyes.
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver
that hangs by its knees;
the cement life boat that wears
its dirty canvas coat;

the faded sign that sits on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.

Over my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out
from under their habits,
as good as good babies who
hav sunk into their carriages.
I watch thier deep clothes
as one dark cloth goes square,
out from its post.
Without discrimination
the wind pull the skirts
of their arms
like wings;
wings at the blouse
of each dark shoulder.
Almost undressed,
I see what remains:
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
loosen from their leather boots
and their wooden chairs
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
out over this iron rail,
nodding their ~~four~~ pink heads to one side;
flying four abreast
in the old fashioned side stroke;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing
without sound.

Then,
let the sea be greater than grass,
or a floating jam of cut lumber,
(or the hot angel in my man's mouth. —) cut
Oh God, let the sea
be greater than the eyes
of all the (terrible) fish
who wait for me.

Dearest you,
seer how my dark girls fly out

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY

Dearest you,
I am surppised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
My car and I are neatly packed aboard
the fat ship Orient that rode us both
toward you last week, splattered by the blue sun,
riding toward you over the blue stones
of this blue street.
Now I am going back and I have
ripped my hand from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far, as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now at 2:00 o'clock
on/~~Agust~~ August the 2nd in 1960.
~~When I drove away from your mouth~~
~~my own was clogged with death.~~

~~Oh, forget about death!~~
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell ORIENT
on the life presever that hangs by my knees
and the cement life boat at my side
has its canvass coat on with a faded sign
that says KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say. I'll save myself.
I'll find words to save myself.

~~Amid~~ IN the ~~distotions~~/ distortions of my head,
I watch the drowned wood of the warf,
the bad rhythm of the water at the edge
and, over me, the sky is without gulls
or humor. I turn from scenery and over
my right shoulder I find four nuns
who sit there like a bridge club,
~~circle~~
~~stooped and chatting to each other, together, chatting in a circle~~
their faces poke out from under their habits
as good as good babies who have sunk down
~~to settle in~~/their ~~snug~~ carraiges.
I watch their deep clothes
flutter out in layers from their faces.
A dark cloth goes square, out from its post,
~~like~~

the argument -

21

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY

Dearest you,
I am surppised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
My car and I are neatly packed aboard
the fat ship Orient that rode us both
toward you last week, splattered by the blue sun,
riding toward you over the blue stones
of this blue street.
Now I am going back and I have
ripped my hand from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far, as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now at 2:00 o'clock
on/~~Agust~~ August the 2nd in 1960.
When I drove away from your mouth
my own was clogged with death.

Oh, forget about death!
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell ORIENT
on the life presever that hangs by my knees
and the cement life boat at my side
has its canvass coat on with a faded sign
that says KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say. I'll save myself.
I'll find words to save myself.

Amid the ~~distortions/~~ distortions of my head,
I watch the drowned wood of the warf,
the bad rhythm of the water at the edge
and, over me, the sky is without gulls
or humor. I turn from scenery and over
my right shoulder I find four nuns
who sit there like a bridge club,
circle
stooped ~~and chatting to each other,~~ together, chatting in a ~~circle~~
~~their~~ faces poke out from under their habits
as good as good babies who have sunk down
to settle in their snug carraiges.
I watch their deep clothes
flutter out in layers from their faces.
A dark cloth goes square, out from its post,
~~like~~

①

Dearest you,
I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
My car and I are neatly packed aboard
thesfaquare ferry that rode us both
toward you last week, spattered by the blue sun,
riding toward you over the blue stones
of this blue street.
Now I am going back and I have
ripped my hand from your hand and I said I would
and I have made it this far, as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now at 2:00 o'clock
on August the 8th in 1960.

These are my eyes;
the orange letters that spell ORIENT
on the life preserver thatyhangs by my knees,
and at my side, the cement life boat
wears it canvas coat with the faded sign
that says KEEP OFFZ
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.
I'll write to you
to save myself.

Beyond the distortions of my head,
I see the drowned wood of the warf,
the bad rhythm of the water at the edge,
and over me, the sky is without gulls
or humor.

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY

Dearest you,
I am not a home when I'm sad
and I'm so surprised to see that the ocean
is still going on.
My car and I are neatly packed aboard
the big ship Orient that rode us both
toward you last week, splatterd by the blue sun,
riding toward you over the blue stones
of this blue street.
Now I am going back and I have ripped my hand
from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far, as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now
at 2:00 o'clock on Agust 2nd in 1960.

Oh, forget about love!
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell ORIENT
on the life preserver that hands by my knees
and the cement life boat, at my side,
with its coat on and its faded emblem saying
KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say, I'll save myself.
I~~'ll write~~ ~~words to save myself.~~
I save myself by writing a poem.

Stooped

As I turn, I see, over my right shoulder,
four nuns, who sit like a bridge club,
chatting to each other in a circle;
their faces poked out from under their habits,
as good as good babies who have sunk
happily

We've got
to give each other
a little [illegible]
[illegible] to [illegible]

[illegible] Wright

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By my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out
from under their habits, as good as
good babies who have sunk in their carriages.
I watch their deep clothes
as one dark cloth goes/~~quite~~/ square,
out from its post.
Without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts
of their arms
like wings;
wings at the blue
of each dark shoulder.
Almost undressed,
I see what remains:
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
loosen from their leather boots,
loosen from the rungs of their wooden chairs,
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
out over this iron rail,
nodding their four pink heads
all at once, to one side;
four abreast, their arms stroking the sky
in the old fashioned side stroke;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
like fish do,
singing without sound.

Then,
let the sea
be greater than grass,
or a floating jam of cut lumber,
or greater than

out from its post.
Without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts
of their arms,
like wings;
wings at the blouse
of each dark shoulder.
Almost undressed,
I see what ~~will~~ remains
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please let
these four nuns
loosen from their leather boots,
loosen from the rungs of their wood chairs,
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
over this iron rail,
nodding their four pink heads
all at once, to one side,
their arms stroking the sky,
~~swimming~~ the old fashioned side storke,
~~their~~ each mouth open~~ing together~~ and ~~as~~ round,
~~they~~ breat~~hing~~ together
like fish,
singing without ~~a~~ sound.

Then,
let the sea
be greater than grass,
or a packed field of floated lumber,
or greater than lips of my man's mouth;
then let the sea
be greater than the eyes
of all the terrible fish
who wait for me.

Dearest you,
I will save myself
to tell you how my dark girls
have gone over the passing light house
of Plum Gut, its shell as rusty
as a camp dish,
its ~~shell~~ as fragile as a pagoda
on a stone;
they go over ~~the little~~ light ~~house~~
that warns me of drowning winds,
that rub over ~~the~~ blind ~~stone~~
and ~~the same~~ ~~blue~~ dover,
wind that will take the toes
and the ears of the rider
or the lover.

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
ea
loosen from their ~~huge~~ helather boots
to rise out glide
over this greasy desk,
stearing out over this iron rail,
each skirt stitched ~~like a fan~~ over ~~their~~ stockings
~~like a glossy fan,~~
~~sallying forth~~
~~slapping their like an open fan~~
moving cautously like an open fan,
let them sally ~~forth~~ forth together,
flying/~~out~~ four abreast
in the old fashioned side stroke;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing
without sound.

no wings
with all
this flying —

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
ponderous
loosen from their leather boots

I am not imploring God to set them
loose, that is set them free
I am asking that they be permitted
to loosen themselves —

the garments
on their arms
is ~~as~~ full as
a skirt —

I was unaware
a word like
rise
bound as
the famous
a child.

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY

Dearest you,
My car and I are neatly packed aboard
the good ship Orient that rode us both
toward you last week, splattered by the blue sun,
riding toward you over the blue stones
of this blue street.
Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far, as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now,
at 2:00 o'clock on August 2nd, in 1960.

Oh forget about heart!
These are my eyes:
the orange letters spelling ORIENT
on the life presever at my feet,
the cement life boat, wearing its coat on,
its emblem faded, saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right! I say. I'll find words
to save myself.

As I turn, I see, over my right shoulder,
four nuns, who sit like a bridge club,
chatting to each other in a circle;
their faces poked out from under their habits,
as good as good babies who have sunk
happily into their ~~wide~~ [illegible] carragies.
I watch their deep clothes [illegible]
~~that were meant to cover, to cover them~~ closely,
flutter from their faces like hair
and I see ~~the~~ wind ~~suck~~ up ~~these veils~~
without discrimintation
and I see, suddenly, under the fringe
that ankle and that chain,
I see each dark cloth go sharply square
from its post, like the American Flag in a picture;
or now, fat like the big bowl of a sail
or else they are wings, [illegible]
out from their unknown bodies I see wings,
wings caught at the blouse of ~~their~~ each shoulder,
w~~orking as~~ black works for the ~~dear~~ magic.

Oh God, although I am very sad,
could you please let these nuns
loosen from their leather boots
loosen from the sharp rungs of their wooden chairs,

pulled -
say

spreaded

to rise over this greasy deck
out across their iron rail,
nodding their four pink heads,
all at once, to one side,
their mouths round in an Ahmen
and let the sea under them be greater than grass,
or lumber or the ~~sound~~ of my man's dear mouth
and let ~~them~~ be greater than the eyes
of all the terrible fish who look up at me.

Oh dearest you,
I am not a home
when I'm sad
and I am so surprised to see that the ocean
is still going on ~~and so~~ I ~~must~~ save myself
~~to tell you how~~ these good ladies go up,
slippery, over the passing light house of Plum Gut
that warns me of drowning winds that take both [illegible]
the ~~fedrof the rider and even the hands of the lover~~s, [illegible]
There go my dark ladies, siloutes over the light house,
that fragile padoda on a stone, ~~as~~ rusty as a camp dish,
they sing to it of the ~~good~~ sleep.

I cannot sing about love.
Oh, god damn my heart, I'm riding backward~~s~~,
I watch the land I've left
andthe long wake of the good ship Orient connects us,
a color, if you stopped time, of marble,
or ~~looking at the quickly out,~~ [illegible]
the sea is the face of Mary,
grown old and rough~~t~~ with age,
~~as~~ my good ladies ~~go up~~,
~~as~~ if there were a prayer. .

to rise over this greasy deck
~~out across these~~ iron rail,
nodding their four pink heads
all at once, to one side;
their mouths round in an ahmen.
Then let the sea be greater than grass,
~~or~~ lumber or ~~even~~ the opening of my man's mouth,
~~or~~ greater than the eyes of all the terrible fish
who ~~wink at me~~. WAIT for me.

floating

Dearest you, I will save myself
to tell you ~~how~~ these good ladies ~~go~~ up,
[illegible], over the passing light house of Plum Gut
that warns me of drowning winds that will take
the toes and the ears of ~~both~~ riders and lovers.
There go my dark girls,
silouted over the light house
that is as rusty as a camp dish,
this is a fragile pagoda on a stone.
There go my girls,
they sing for ~~of their glad~~ sleep.

I cannot sing about love.
~~for, god damn my heart,~~
I'm riding backwards.
I watch the land I've left
as the long wake of my boat connects us,
the color, if you stopped time, of marble,
or remembering, ~~that the~~ whole ocean is still going on
while my ~~good~~ ladies ~~go up~~ [illegible]
over the blue air, the blue stones of my blue street,
as if there were a prayer.
~~I really know that~~ the sea is the face of Mary,
grown old and rough with age .

Nothing has happened.
Mary has grown old.

[illegible]

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY

I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far
as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now
holding my wallet, my cigarettes
and my car keys
at 2 o'clock on a tuesday
in August of 1960.

Dearest you,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened.
The sea is very old.
The sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage
or unusual hope,
grown rough and wrinkled
with her uncurable age.

[illegible]

Tired & monotonous

Still,
I have eyes;
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver
that hangs by its knees;
the cement life boat that wears
its dirty canvas coat;
the faded sign that sifts on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.

Over my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out
from under their habits,
as good as good babies who
have sunk into their carriages.
Without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts
of their arms
like wings.
Almost undressed,
I see what remains:
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

14

read
Man Moses

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
loosen from their leather boots
and their wooden chairs
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
out over this iron rail,
nodding their pink heads to one side,
flying four abreast
in the old fashioned side stroke;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing
without sound.

more
particular

Then,
let the sea
be greater than grass
or a floating jam of cut lumber.
Oh God, let the sea
be greater than the eyes
of all the terrible fish
who wait for me.

~~Oh dearest,~~ Oh Dearest, you
see how my dark girls fly out
over the passing light house of Plum Gut,
its shell as rusty nice
as a camp dish,
(as fragile as a pagoda)
(on a stone;
out over the little light house
that warns me of drowning winds
that rub over its blind bottom
and its blue cover;
winds that will take the toes
and the ears of the rider
or the lover.

not one
but many
nicely - I mourn well

There go my dark girls, lose shoes
their plumes swinging
from their beds.
Oh, they are lighter than flying dogs
or the breath od dolphins;
each mouth opens gratefully,
wider than a milk cup.
My dark girls sing for this.
They are going up.

not sure
of any of these
lines?

Dear
De~~arest,~~ I give you them to you
~~here are~~/ my four dark girls;
see them rise
on black wings, drinking
the sky, without smiles

or hands
or shoes.
They call back to us
from the gauzy edge of paradise,
good news, good news. living
& [illegible]

94
3
282

k

Anne Sexton
40 Clearwater Rd.
Newton Lower Falls
Massachusetts

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY

I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far
as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now
holding my wallet, my cigarettes
and my car keys
at 2 o'clock on a tuesday
in August of 1960.

Dearest,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened.
The sea is very old.
The sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage
or unusual hope,
grown rough and wrinkled
with its incurable age.

Still,
I have eyes.
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver
that hangs by its knees;
the cement life boat that wears
its dirty canvas coat;
the faded sign that sits on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.

Over my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out
from under their habits,
as good as good babies who
have sunk into their carraiges.
Without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts
of their arms.
Almost undressed,
I see what remains:

that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
3) loosen from their leather boots
and their wooden chairs
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
out over this iron rail,
their skirts stitched over their feet
like an open fan,
nodding their pink heads to one side,
flying four abreast
in the old fashioned side stroke;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing without sound.

Dearest,
see how my dark girls sally forth,
over the passing light house of Plum Gut,
4 its shell as rusty
as a camp dish;
out over the little light house
5 the warns me of drowning winds
that rub over its blind bottom
and its blue cover;
winds that will take the toes
and the ears of the rider
or the lover.

There go my dark girls,
their plumes swinging
6) from their thick beds.
Oh, they are lighter than flying dogs
or the breath of dolphins;
each mouth opens gratefully,
wider than a milk cup.
My dark girls sing for this.
They are going up.

Here are my four dark girls:
see them rise
on black wings, drinking
the sky, without smiles
or hands
or shoes.
They call back to us
from the gauzy edge of paradise,
good news, good news.

~~Anne~~ Sexton
~~40 Clearwater~~ Rd.
Newton Lower Falls
Massachusetts

JUN 10 1961 232

#6, on 27 picas

LETTER WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY

-pt Verse [illegible] 27 picas. Set line a line, no indent

5500

I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far
as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now
holding my wallet, my cigarettes
and my car keys
at 2 o'clock on a tuesday
in August of 1960.

white line

Dearest,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened.
The sea is very old.
The sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage
or unusual hope,
grown rough and wrinkled
with incurable age.

white line

Still,
I have eyes.
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver
that hangs by my knees;
the cement lifeboat that wears
its dirty canvas coat;
the faded sign that sits on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.

"/" 1-pt Caps

white line

Over my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out
from under their habits,
as good as good babies who
have sunk into their carriages.
Without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts
of their arms.
Almost undressed,
I see what remains:
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

white line

→

5509

Oh, God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
loosen from their leather boots
and their wooden chairs
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
out over this iron rail,
nodding their pink heads to one side,
flying four abreast
in the old-fashioned side stroke;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing without sound.

white line

Dearest,
see how my dark girls sally forth,
over the passing light house of Plum Gut,
its shell as rusty
as a camp dish,
as fragile as a pagoda
on a stone;
out over the little light house
that warns me of drowning winds
that rub over its blind bottom
and its blue cover;
winds that will take the toes
and the ears of the rider
or the lover.

white line

There go my dark girls;
their dresses puff
in the leeward air.
Oh, they are lighter than flying dogs
or the breath of dolphins;
each mouth opens gratefully,
wider than a milk cup.
My dark girls sing for this:
They are going up.

white line

Here are my four dark girls.
See them rise
on black wings, drinking
the sky, without smiles
or hands
or shoes.
They call back to us
from the gauzy edge of paradise,
good news, good news.

Itals

11-please on separate line; flush right with longest line

Anne Sexton

#

A FAREWELL LETTER, WRITTEN ON THE LONG ISLAND FERRY (I love you.)

Dearest you,
I am surprised to see
that the ocean is still going on.
Now I am going back
and I have ripped my hand
from your hand as I said I would
and I have made it this far
as I said I would
and I am on the top deck now
holding my wallet, my cigarettes
and my car keys
at 2 o'clock on a tuesday
in August of 1960.

in the grand style!

Dearest you,
although everything has happened,
nothing has happened.
The sea is very old.
The sea is the face of Mary,
without miracles or rage
or unusual hope,
grown rough and wrinkled
with her incurable age.

Still,
I have eyes.
These are my eyes:
the orange letters that spell
ORIENT on the life preserver
that hangs by its knees;
the cement life boat that wears
its dirty canvas coat;
the faded sign that sits on its shelf
saying KEEP OFF.
Oh, all right, I say,
I'll save myself.

Over my right shoulder
I see four nuns
who sit like a bridge club,
their faces poked out
from under their habits,
as good and good babies who
have sunk into their carriages.
Without discrimination
the wind pulls the skirts
of their arms,
like wings.
Almost undressed,
I see what remains:
that holy wrist,
that ankle,
that chain.

it tail !

Oh God,
although I am very sad,
could you please
let these four nuns
loosen from their leather boots

the undermining of possible [illegible] is [illegible] by lone-[illegible]
9

and their wooden chairs
to rise out
over this greasy deck,
out over this iron rail,
nodding their pink heads to one side,
flying four abreast
in the old fashioned side stroke;
each mouth open and round,
breathing together
as fish do,
singing
without sound.

Don't tell me you don't have a sensitive ear. This sort of passage sings unmistakably.

Then,
let the sea
be greater than grass
or a floating jam of cut lumber.
Oh God, let the sea
be greater than the eyes
of all the terrible fish
who wait for me.

Dearest you,
see how my dark girls fly out
over the passing light house of Plum Gut,
its shell as rusty
as a camp dish,
as fragile as a pagoda
on a stone;
out over the little light house
that warns me of drowning winds
that rub over its blind bottom
and its blue cover;
winds that will take the toes
and the ears of the rider
or the lover.

There go my dark girls,
their plumes swinging
from their beds.
Oh, they are lighter than flying dogs ?
or the breath of dolphins;
each mouth opens gracefully,
wider than a milk cup.
My dark girls sing for this.
They are going up.

Dearest you,
here are my four dark girls:
see them rise
on black wings, drinking
the sky, without smiles
or hands
or shoes.
They call back to us
from the gauzy edge of paradise,
Good news, good news.

to this? It... a little forced. ←

Anne Sexton ~~Augst~~/ August 1960

"magnificent." But your very last line suggests a faltering of your assurance — as though — in the nick of time — Oedipus were to be rescued at the last minute — by the Lone Ranger ("Hi-yo Silver, away!") — about your poem, [illegible] disguised as [illegible] I don't mean to be irreverent [illegible] but I think, it is [illegible]

[illegible] the last line is forced; then only after [illegible] what if you went back [illegible] to the book? I think it hurts, but I think the poem's power will be sustained if at the end by dealing with the miraculous in the same concrete & precise descriptions of commonplace (transfigured) in this poem by the music — really glorified) as you had used before [illegible] "affluent" [illegible] Plum Gut [illegible] perfect [illegible]

10

Appendix T

Jesus Walking

When Jesus walked into the wilderness
he carried a man on his back,
at least it had the form of a man,
a fisherman perhaps with a wet nose,
a baker perhaps with flour in his eyes.
The man was dead it seems
and yet he was unkillable.
Jesus carried many men
yet there was only one man --
if indeed it was a man.
There in the wilderness all the leaves
reached out their hands
but Jesus went on by.
The bees beckoned him their honey
but Jesus went on by.
The boar cut out its heart and offered it
but Jesus went on by
with his heavy burden.
The devil approached and slapped him on the jaw
and Jesus walked on.
The devil made the earth move like an elevator
and Jesus walked on.
The devil built a city of whores,
each in little angel beds,
and Jesus walked on with his burden.
For forty days, for forty nights
Jesus put one foot in front of the other
and the man he carried,
if it was a man,
became heavier and heavier.
He was carrying all the trees of the world
which are one tree.
He was carrying all the boots
of all the men in the world
which are one boot.
He was carrying our blood.
One blood.

To pray, Jesus knew,
is to be a man carrying a man.

Appendix U

Gull

You with your wings like spatulas,
letting the blue turn into sugar kisses,
letting the fog slip through your fingertips,
informing the lighthouse like turning on the oven,
sobbing at the fish over the Atlantic,
crying out like young girls in fevers an chills,
crying out like friends who sing from the tavern
of fighting hands, crying out, like a goat with
its mouth full of pearls, snatching the bait
like blood from the coals. Oh Gull of my childhood,
cry over my window over and over, take me back,
oh harbors of oil and cunners, teach me to laugh
and cry again that way that was the good bargain
of youth, when the man following you was not a tail
but an uncle, when the death that came upon you
when you were thirsty was solved by a Coke,
but what can be done gull gull when you turn the sun
on again, a dead fruit
and all that flies today
is crooked and vain and has been cut from a book.

Appendix V

The Love Plant

A freak but moist flower
tangles my lungs, knits into my heart
crawls up my throat
and sucks like octopi on my tongue.
You planted it happily last summer
and I let it take root in my moon-hope,
not knowing it would come to crowd me out,
to explode inside me this March.
All winter trying to diminish it,
I felt it enlarge.
But of course never spoke to you of this,
for my sanity was awful enough,
and I felt compelled to think only of yours.
Now that you have gone for always
why does not the plant shrivel up?
I try to force it away.
I swallow stones
Three times I swallow slender vials
with crossbones on them.
But it thrives on their liquid solution.
I light matches and put them in my mouth,
and my teeth melt but the greenery hisses on.
I drink blood from my wrists
and the green slips out like a bracelet.
Couldn't one of my keepers get a lawn mower
and chop it down if I turned inside out for an hour?
This flower, this pulp, the hay stuff
has got me, got me.
Apparently both of us are unkillable.

I am coughing. I am gagging. I feel it enter
the nasal passages, the sinus, lower, upper
and thus to the brain -- spurting out of my eyes
I must find a surgeon who will cut it out, burn it out
as they do sometimes with violent epileptics.
I will dial one quickly before I erupt!

Would you guess at it
if you looked at me swinging down Comm. Ave.
in my long black coat with its fur hood,
and my long pink skirt poking out step by step?

That under the coat, the pin, the bra, the pants,
in the recesses where love knelt
a coughing plant is smothering me?

Perhaps I am becoming unhuman
and should accept its natural order?
Perhaps I am becoming part of the green world
and maybe a rose will just pop out of my mouth?
Oh passerby, let me bite it off and spit it at you
so you can say "How nice!" and nod your thanks
and walk three blocks to your lady love
and she will stick it behind her ear
not knowing it will crawl into her ear, her brain
and drive her mad.

Then she will be like me --
a pink doll with her frantic green stuffing.

Appendix W

What has it come to, Dr. Y.
my needing you?
I work days,
stuffed into a pine-paneled box.
You work days
with your air conditioner gasping
like a tube-fed woman.
I move my thin legs into your office
and we work over the cadaver of my soul.
We make a stage set out of my past
and stuff painted puppets into it.
We make a bridge toward my future
and I cry to you: I will be steel!
I will build a steel bridge over my need!
I will build a bomb shelter over my heart!
But my future is a secret.
It is as shy as a mole.

What has it come to
my needing you...
I am the irritating pearl
and you are the necessary shell.
You are the twelve faces of the Atlantic
and I am the rowboat. I am the burden.

How dependent, the fox asks?
Why so needy, the snake sings?
It's this way...
Time after time I fall down into the well
and you dig a tunnel in the dangerous sand,
you take the altar from a church and shore it up.
With your own white hands you dig me out.
You give me hoses so I can breathe.
You make me a skull to hold the worms
of my brains. You give me hot chocolate
although I am known to have no belly.
The trees are whores yet you place
me under them. The sun is poison
yet you toss me under it like a rose.
I am out of practice at living
You are as brave as a motorcycle.

What has it come to
that I should defy you?
I would be a copper wire
without electricity.
I would be a Beacon Hill dowager
without her hat.
I would be surgeon
who cut with his own nails.
I would be a glutton
who threw away his spoon.
I would be God
without Jesus to speak for me.

I would be Jesus
without a cross to prove me.

August 24, 1964

Appendix X

The Black Art

A woman who writes feels too much,
those trances and portents!
As if cycles and children and islands
weren't enough; as if mourners and gossips
and vegetables were never enough.
She thinks she can warn the stars.
A writer is essentially a spy.
Dear love, I am that girl.

A man who writes knows too much,
such spells and fetiches!
As if erections and congresses and products
weren't enough; as if machines and galleons
and wars were never enough.
With used furniture he makes a tree.
A writer is essentially a crook.
Dear love, you are that man.

Never loving ourselves,
hating even our shoes and our hats,
we love each other, precious, precious.
Our hands are light blue and gentle.
Our eyes are full of terrible confessions.
But when we marry,
the children leave in disgust.
There is too much food and no one left over
to eat up all the weird abundance.